

## Prologue

Sebastian Delacour resisted the urge to shudder as he stared into the cold, hard eyes of his guest. There was not a speck of emotion in those emerald orbs; no love, no hate. Nothing. And for a man who prided himself in reading the faces of others, it was a very disconcerting thing indeed. The French Minister of Magic wet his lips before speaking.

"I will assume that you know why I have summoned you into my office?"

The man - no, boy, blinked at him. To his chagrin, Sebastian found himself looking away from the impassive gaze. It was like staring into a cold void, and seemed to suck in all the warmth from the room. Then the boy nodded, and the Minister released the breath he had inadvertently been holding.

"It has only been a few months since my election as Minister of Magic," Sebastian guessed, correctly, that his guest's continued silence meant for him to continue, "and already I find myself slandered by the ultra-conservatives within the party. I am married to a half-Veela, you see, and the blood-purists in our government are quite literally screaming their heads off. They consider my wife to be a half-breed, not even human, and to see a minister elected into office championing the rights of her kind is something they will not abide. They cannot do me any harm politically, for the rumors they spread are just that. Rumors. And the population thankfully holds no such bigoted bias. But I am afraid for my family."

The boy's face remained blank, but Sebastian could see he was digesting the information at a record pace.

"Just a week ago, an assassination attempt at my manor cost me the lives of three aurors and several of my household staff," the Minister paused, remembering the bloody scene he arrived home to, "Thankfully, my wife and two daughters were out visiting relatives that day, or I fear I would be speaking to you as a widower. The blood-purists in our ministry have only a small following, yet they are all powerful men with powerful connections. They may deny it, but I do not doubt for a minute that the attempt on my family's lives was made by them."

"And that is where I come in," the boy said. This time, Sebastian did shudder. The voice was like the face, toneless and utterly without emotion.

"Yes. I will be honest with you. If Hogwarts was not hosting the Triwizard Tournament, an event my eldest daughter wishes dearly to compete in, your services would not be needed. I have more than enough protection here in France, but that protection is limited to my daughter if she is to go to England."

"Simply convince your daughter not to go."

Sebastian smiled slightly at his guest's suggestion.

"My eldest has inherited the stubbornness of her mother, to an exact degree almost, and I am afraid any insinuations I might make to her regarding the subject will be met with a... unpleasant temper."

To this, the boy just shrugged, and the silence resumed.

"Yes, well," Sebastian continued uncomfortably, "I have seen your credentials, and I must say I am impressed. But I do find myself curious how a wizard your age could bring down notorious criminals famed for their use of the Dark Arts."

"I was better."

Sebastian let the boy's statement hang, hoping for more, but he was soon disappointed. The boy just stared at him, and the Minister realized those three words were the only explanation he was going to get.

"I see," Sebastian halted before moving onto what he hoped would be the last part of the negotiation, "You understand the predicament I am in. I have always prided myself in being a man capable of protecting his family, but with the resources the blood-purists have at their disposal, I fear for my daughter's safety outside France's borders."

"England has blood-purists of its own," came the toneless reply, "I have dealt with them before."

"And no doubt you have seen what violence they are capable of should their bigotry be unleashed."

Another nod.

"It is my hope," Sebastian tread carefully, "that we can come into an agreement, a contract if you will, for you to provide protection to my daughter for her trip to Hogwarts and back. Of course, you will be rewarded for your efforts with a substantial payment from my own vaults."

"And the public?" the Minister marveled at the boy's cunning, "They would not shun you for your choice of a bodyguard? They are a fickle lot after all."

"I would gladly suffer through the recriminations of the public for the safety of my family."

"Then you are a better father than most," a gesture of respect, the first since the conversation had started, and Sebastian dared to hope the deal might come through.

"However," the boy's tone had turned clipped and business-like, "I must ask you of a certain condition before I accept the contract."

"The money I can give to you when you accept-"

His guest raised a hand to stop him. Sebastian found himself angered by the boy's impudence while at the same time respecting his courage. He was the Minister of Magic of France, with the power of an entire wizarding country at his hands, and the boy was talking to him as though he were his equal! Sebastian allowed himself to smile inwardly. Were it any other being speaking to him in such a manner, magical or non, he would have assumed arrogance. But here, the boy's demeanor radiated not superiority, but confidence. As though if nothing in the world could stop him. A worthy trait indeed.

"Money is not the issue. I will accept payment when my task is completed to my contractor's satisfaction. What I require from you, Minister, is a promise."

Sebastian swallowed.

"A promise for what?"

For the first time, the boy smiled; a cold, cruel smirk that did not reach his eyes.

"A promise that I may use whatever is necessary to destroy those who would infringe on your daughter's honor."

## Chapter 1: Boy Meets Girl

Fleur Delacour was fuming. The blonde-haired witch stomped through the manor halls, her Veela aura flaring visibly. The argument with her mother had left them both mentally exhausted, and Fleur had stormed out in anger after neither would budge. The older woman had dared to suggest that she stay home for the coming school year, and Fleur had told her mother exactly what she thought of that idea.

Stay at home when the Triwizard Tournament was to happen? Hah. Not a chance. Her parents did not understand. She needed this. Needed to win so that her classmates, her friends, teachers, everyone would understand that it was not just the Veela that made Fleur Delacour Fleur Delacour, but other things as well. Strength. Intelligence. Charisma. Fleur had those in spades, but so few looked beyond her face. She needed to prove to these people that her heritage alone did not define her.

For Fleur wanted to date boys who wouldn't become glassy-eyed and tongue-tied in her presence, wanted friends that wouldn't flock to her for her Veela beauty alone, wanted a life that was based on her merits as an individual rather than her looks as a dressed up doll.

Fleur tramped into the guest room, her anger still flowing from her like waves. She understood the danger. Her mother had claimed she did not, but she did. Sebastian's election to the position of Minister of Magic was not a surprise to the family. The honor and morals he held that attracted Apolline to him proved to be a desirable trait in the field of politics as well. The public loved him. But the purebloods did not, and when a portion of the Delacour Mansion exploded from within not three weeks ago, initial suspicion had been pinned on them. But there was little evidence. What did not lay in chunks had been vaporized, and so the French Ministry could do nothing except issue warnings that terrorism would not be tolerated.

Fleur knew that as a family member, she was a target for her father's political enemies, but that would matter little at Hogwarts. The ancient school of wizardry was the most well warded castle in Europe, and the droves of British aurors that were promised by Minister Fudge to safeguard the event would deter any assassins. Fleur was sure of it. Her parents were worried for nothing, and now,

her chance to prove to the world that she was not just some beautiful girl to be oohed and aahed at was slipping from her grasp.

Just then, the door to the guest room opened, and her father entered, looking slightly nervous. Without a second's pause, Fleur stalked up to the man, intent on another long-winded argument.

"Fleur, my flower," Sebastian smiled, "Why the long face?"

"Mama is still adamant about my prison sentence this school year," her father winced at the term 'prison', and the smile faltered, "I hope you will see reason, papa, and allow me to participate in the Triwizard Tournament."

"There is no winning when arguing with a Veela," Sebastian sighed in defeat, and Fleur dared herself to hope, "It will make Appolline most displeased with me, but I will allow you to go to Hogwarts this Fall."

Fleur threw her arms around her father in elation. Sebastian instinctively clutched his daughter to his chest. A second later and the two separated, both beaming.

"I do have a condition though," Sebastian began and Fleur's smile wavered, "There is someone you must take to Hogwarts."

The smile disappeared altogether.

"Is he a bodyguard?"

Sebastian coughed suddenly and looked nervous.

"Not at all, my flower. He is a nephew of mine, from a distant family, and has come to France for his schooling. He wishes to see England and the Tournament is a once in a lifetime opportunity for him."

"I thought much of our extended family is still in your bad graces," Fleur arched her brow in suspicion.

"Ah, well, he is from a part of the family that I like," Sebastian shifted uncomfortably, and caused his daughter to glare at him, "In any case, he's here now. Please treat him well, flower."

Her father stepped hastily aside to reveal a boy with emerald green eyes.

Blink.

Pause.

Blink.

Damn. The habit comes at the worst of times. I see proffered hand in front of me. I take it and kiss the back. Standard greeting procedure for female clients.

"I apologize," I hear myself say, "An old family trait. We seem to lose our focus at the most inopportune times."

The coldness in the girl's eyes fade, replaced by a spark of interest.

"It iz nothing," her accent is heavy, but in an attractive way.

"Ah, but I am afraid it is something when I have slighted such a beautiful lady," her cheeks blush, "Perhaps we can converse in French?"

"You know French?"

I ignore the doubt in her voice and am about to reply when Sebastian does it for me.

"Bayard is multi-lingual. He knows many tongues, and is quite proficient at all of them."

I incline my head in the Minister's direction. He seems almost desperate to make a good impression of me to his daughter. A family man. I guess I can respect that.

"Bayard is a strange name," Fleur replies to her father in French, though her gaze still lingers on me.

"Then you will have to speak with my mother and father regarding the subject," my fluency in her language seems to surprise her.

"Now it seems I have slighted you," she smiles at me.

"Not in the least, Miss Delacour."

"It seems the two of you are getting along famously," Sebastian beams, but his stance is nervous and full of anxiety, "Unfortunately, I must be attending to my wife," the Frenchman strides past me before looking back, "I will see you at dinner, Bayard."

I watch him disappear from view down a corridor, shouting "Apolline! Apolline!" at the top of his lungs.

I turn my attention back to the girl I am to protect, and notice her staring at me with a calculating expression. Swiftly, the expression disappears, and it is with an innocent look on her face that Fleur places a hand on my arm.

"Come Bayard, I will lead you on a tour of our mansion if you are willing."

"I do not wish to intrude..."

"Please, Bayard," her smile has become predatory, "It will be a pleasure."

Cold green eyes. Staring at her. Accusing. A tiny finger points at her. Demanding an answer.

"Why?" the boy with messy black hair and lightning-shaped scar asks her.

"Harry! Harry! I can explain-"

"Why?" the boy asks again, and she could see the pain of betrayal etched across his features.

"Harry! Come back to us! Please! I-"

"Why him and not me? Why love Adam more than me?"

"We didn't mean to! I can explain Harry! Please come back!"



Wordlessly, the boy turns and walks away, disappearing into the mist.

Lily Potter sat bolt upright in her bed, tears spilling from her eyes. The same dream. Over and over again.

With a shuddering gasp, the Muggle Studies professor rose, and staggered to her desk. Ignoring the heavy books that lay haphazardly across the table, she collapsed into the chair and buried her face in her hands.

Harry would have been fourteen this year. A bright, eager boy blossoming into a kind-hearted, and noble man. The guilt came. Flooding. Powerful. Like a crashing wave. Lily clutched her chest as she remembered her son the last time she saw him. A skinny frame with wide, caring eyes. The wild black hair that refused to be tamed. The silent way he would regard things. And the sad little smile that would crease his lips when she turned away from him to tend to Adam.

Wiping away the tears, Lily stumbled from her seat, and reached for the door. She would talk to Albus. The old headmaster would listen to her. She knew it would do little good to her conscience, but a conversation with Dumbledore would, at the very least, calm her turbulent mind.

I see her hand straying near her wand. The slight stiffening of her shoulders. A near unnoticeable change in the speed of her pace. My fingers brush my own wand. No. That will not do. I cannot hex the client I am supposed to protect.

So it is no surprise to me that I suddenly find Fleur's wand tickling my chin.

Blink.

Pause.

Blink.

"I know you are not here just because you are a distant relative," Fleur's tirade forces me to focus, "Many of father's relatives spurned

him when he wed my mother. My father is a proud man, and he will not accept their apologies after he was betrayed."

Betrayed. She does not know what the word truly means.

"You cannot also be his friend. The attack on our manor has left him suspicious of everyone. He would not have invited you here if he had no reason."

The girl is smart. A tad slow on the dueling side though. The grip on her wand is light, and the movements she makes with it is faulty.

"So that leaves us with two conclusions, Mister Bayard."

"And they are?" I ask, noticing with interest my surroundings. Family photos and unsmiling busts. Statues too.

"Look at me when I am speaking to you!" Fleur declares haughtily.

"I am listening," I say as I move closer to regard a photograph of two beaming adults, "Your parents? When they were young I presume?"

"We are not talking about my parents! We are talking about you!" I am amused by her flustered look. Always keep your opponent off-guard.

"And what is there to talk about regarding me?"

"I find you to be untrustworthy," she snarls.

"Nine and a half inches. Rosewood. Veela hair core."

"What?" Fleur blinks at my sudden statement.

"Your wand."

"How did you know-" then she sees me twirling a very familiar instrument between my fingers. A further look at her hand reveals that her wand isn't there. Her eyes narrow dangerously. I offer the wand back, butt end pointed to her.

"Would an untrustworthy man give you your wand back?"

"I presume that the normal way of communication will not work with you, Mister Bayard," Fleur glowers at me as she snatches her wand from my palm.

"My lips are sealed, milady."

"Then I will have to resort to other means."

I have time to ponder that for half a second before her allure hits me at full force. Her long blonde hair. Lustrous. Gleaming. Her large eyes, filled with promised pleasures. The gentle swell of her breasts. I feel her delicate fingers brush against my cheek. It causes a shiver to pass down my spine.

"You will tell me," she has switched back to English now, and the accent works wonders with the allure, "everything about you."

Her lips look incredibly kissable up close.

"My name is Bayard," I start and Fleur nods encouragingly, "And I do believe we will miss dinner if this is allowed to continue."

She looks stunned. I slide away from her grasp, before turning to regard her.

"Coming?"

Albus Dumbledore sighed as he watched his Muggles Studies Professor leave. The aged headmaster slumped back and pressed his fingers together. The nightmares that haunted Lily Potter was something that likely would last until the end of her days. It was something that no Dreamless Sleep Potion could cure. Magic was a treatment for mental problems yes, but it could do nothing about guilt. And guilt weighed heavily on the Potter family.

Albus shook his head sadly. It had been him who had discovered Harry's disappearance, and that fact alone was enough to strain the relationship between the headmaster and the Potters for several years. The mere thought that a family would willingly fawn over one child while utterly ignoring the other was enough to spark a fiery anger in the old wizard. He remembered entering the Potter Cottage to see Lily and James exulting in Adam's first bout of accidental magic. There was much boasting from the couple, and Albus had

congratulated them. He had then asked about Harry, and his heart had grown cold at the blank stares he received in turn.

Harry had always been there. Always near the family, looking enviously on as Adam received the attention that half should have been his. Dumbledore had tried to warn the Potters about estranging their other son, but his warnings fell upon deaf ears. As both children grew, Albus had taken it upon himself to speak to Harry every time he visited, and found with delight that the young boy possessed both a keen mind and a sharp wit. Harry had treasured the times the aged wizard would spend with him, and Albus soon grew to love him as a grandfather would.

But alas, a grandfather's love could not replace a parent's, and when Dumbledore stormed up the stairs he found Harry's room hauntingly empty.

Eight years. Eight years Lily and James had treated Harry as a mere object in their lives, and eight years of deprived love had pushed the boy away. Albus raised a steady hand and pressed it against his forehead as tears threatened to form. It was partially his fault, he knew. If he had not claimed Adam as the Boy-Who-Lived this would never have happened, and Harry would still be with his family, sharing the attention with Adam. Dumbledore sometimes wondered if Harry had been marked by Voldemort, would Adam run away? Somehow, he doubted it. Harry would not have allowed his parents to neglect his brother.

The Potters had been devastated. Crushed. Mentally and physically. James seemed to age years as weeks passed without finding Harry. Lily shrank into herself and lost the bright and happy luster that she had held onto since her first year at Hogwarts. Adam had turned listless and moody without his brother. Dumbledore was saddened it took them that long to realize how much Harry meant in their lives. The fame of being the parents of the Boy-Who-Lived had swallowed them and it was only after their son was lost that their common sense returned.

Sirius and Remus had been the first to forgive. They were the family's best friends, and godfathers to both the Potter children. The loss of Harry stung them, and Dumbledore had a suspicion they were fonder of Harry than of Adam. But the Potters were hurting, and so Sirius and Remus had come to help in any way they can. A

few days later, Arthur and Molly Weasley had flooded in. Arthur floored James with a vicious punch to the nose. Molly had slapped Lily. Then Arthur had helped James up and Molly engulfed Lily in a Weasley hug. Both had expressed their revulsion at Harry's mistreatment and then their willingness to forgive. The two families talked until late in the evening and left stronger friends than ever.

But those were their closest friends, and it would be years before the Potters would receive the same affection from their other acquaintances. Frank and Alice Longbottom had taken the longest to reciprocate the offers of friendship. They loved their boy and were fiercely protective of Neville. To them, neglecting a child was something akin to sacrilege, and it was only after James dragged Frank away from his office for a heart-to-heart talk that the Longbottoms began to improve their relations with the Potters.

And then there were some that refused to forgive. Refused to be friends who had committed such a blasphemous crime. Minerva McGonagall had been one such person, and the staff meetings Dumbledore held were laced with tension as the Deputy Headmistress glared at his Muggle Studies professor.

Dumbledore forced the memories away from his weary mind. The school semester was but a few days away, and with the Triwizard Tournament being implemented for the first time in hundreds of years, he had much work to do.

Sighing again, the aged headmaster sent a silent prayer to whatever deity was watching over Harry Potter and went back to studying the documents his heads of house had submitted.

"I think she knows," Sebastian said glumly.

The boy, now Bayard, gave him an inscrutable glance.

"Was I really that bad?" the older man sighed.

"Bad at what?" Bayard rasped, pacing around the mansion's library.

"Bad at hiding things from my family."

"That would depend. Do you want me to lie or tell the truth?" the boy had stopped and was picking through a shelf full of arcane tomes.

"What if I wanted you to lie?"

"Then I would say that your attempts at deceiving your daughter for her own good went extremely well and that she really believes that I am a nephew of yours. I would also say that she holds no suspicion towards either of us and that she will go to Hogwarts thinking her father is the finest amongst men."

Sebastian snorted.

"And if I wanted you to tell the truth?"

Bayard stopped leafing through the book he had chosen and turned to look at him.

"You sucked."

A ghost of a smile flitted across the older man's face. Then it was gone, replaced by concern.

"Do you think Fleur will hate me? For lying to her?"

The boy shrugged, and placed the tome back on its shelf.

"She is your daughter."

It was just a single sentence, but somehow it made Sebastian feel better. The Minister of Magic leaned back into his chair and watched as Bayard continued to pace.

"My family was quite smitten with you," Sebastian said, changing the subject to what he hoped would be a lighter topic, "Gabrielle especially. I have not seen her this happy for a long while."

The boy just shrugged again, and allowed the man to continue.

"Apolline fawns over you as well. But what surprises me is Fleur. She was watching you throughout dinner. Scrutinizing, for a lack of a better word."

"The tour she gave me proved to be an interesting affair for the both of us," Bayard noticed Sebastian's alarmed look, and smiled thinly,

"Relax. You are my contractor and she is my client. That is all there is."

"Very professional," Sebastian commented.

"If I was not, then you would not have hired me."

"True, true," the older man mused, "But the act you put up in front of my family was disturbingly convincing... If it was an act."

"It was," Bayard confirmed without emotion, "It always works better if the clients I am to protect think well of me. They never-"

"Never know that deep down, you are an emotionless husk devoid of feeling," Sebastian suggested. The boy stared at him with those eerie green eyes, and the Minister was afraid he had crossed the line

"I'm sorry-" began Sebastian, but Bayard shook his head slightly. The boy swept a hand through his unruly blonde hair and Sebastian thought for a moment he saw the faint trace of a zigzagging scar.

"You are right. As some of my clients say when their contracts have ended," the smirk returned, colder than the winter chill, "I am quite the monster."

## Chapter 2: Beauxbatons

"Who is your new companion?" Fleur shot her friend an irritable look.

"A distant cousin. One I have never known before."

Claire nodded knowingly and moved to match the quarter-Veela's pace.

"I did not realize your father was in the practice of hiring teenagers as bodyguards," the brown-haired witch turned again to look at the boy in question, "Though he is quite easy on the eyes," Claire wagged her eyebrows suggestively, "Have you tried the allure on him?"

"Yes," Fleur snapped, "And he was immune. A dozen steps later and Fleur realized Claire was no longer in step with her. She looked back to see her friend staring at her with mouth wide open.

"What?"

"Don't you see?" Claire gushed as she ran up, "You found someone who isn't attracted only to your allure! Isn't that something you've always wanted? And he's even your bodyguard! Ooooh, this is like one of those muggle soap operas I've been watching! I'm so happy for you Fleur!"

Fleur sighed and shook her head.

"You are impossible Claire. He is younger than me. Just a boy. And I have not yet confirmed that he is my bodyguard."

"That's even better! You know it's always the silent bodyguard type that gets the girl in the end. He's going to woo you with his stoic dedication, and then there will be a fight scene where he gets all bloodied up, and you have to go to his side and help heal him and then he looks up into your eyes and sees true love and the two of you live happily ever after!"

Fleur blinked.

"I cannot believe Claire, that you have put all of that into a single sentence."



Claire just beamed.

"I doubt, however," Fleur continued, "That your interpretation of the future events will work for me. Again. He is just a boy. So what if he can fight off the allure? There will be others in time."

"Age isn't an issue in love," her friend said indignantly, "So what if is a few years younger? When the two of you grow old together will his age matter then?"

Fleur pressed her lips together.

"I do not know him, Claire. He is just a stranger. Someone my father wanted me to meet. Leave it be."

Claire sighed.

"Alright then, Fleur. But I think you will be missing out. The boy is handsome in his own way and I think there will be girls chasing him before the month is done."

"If he plays with so many girls, then I will know he is not the man for me," Fleur declared, ending the discussion forcibly.

The two proceeded to talk about other things as they walked the scenic route towards Beauxbatons Academy of Magic.

If it is anything the French value above all else, it is beauty, and Beauxbatons is a testament to this simple fact. The palace lacks the dour atmosphere of the other European schools of magic with its bright and cheerful backdrop. The path I walk on is a winding road to the front gates, and I would be lying if I said the scene was not breathtaking.

Fleur walks in front of me with her friend, chatting amicably away.

Blink.

Pause.

Blink.

A large hand encompasses my shoulder and jerks me from my reverie. The instinct to turn and draw my wand is instantaneous. I have to fight it down. Instead, I merely turn my head and gaze up.

"Madam Maxime," I say cordially.

The Headmistress of Beauxbatons looks down at me regally and steers me away from the groups of walking students. I do not protest at this. The strength in the hand that grips on my shoulder deters any thought of struggle.

"It is unusual," Maxime begins, "For a transfer student to be accepted into Beauxbatons. We are a school that caters to the best young men and women France has to offer. You are decidedly not in either category."

I keep silent as we walk, and soon we come to an alcove of trees situated well beyond the ears of students.

"So imagine my surprise, that a few days ago, I received a letter from Sebastian, with Ministry Approval no less, for an order to transfer a young wizard called Bayard into my school. Were Sebastian not a dear friend of mine, this order I would have refused."

"Well, ma'am," I respond, "I'm glad that you accepted."

"The truth, Mister Bayard," she brushes away my thanks, and glares at me, "I would like to know why Sebastian is in such a hurry to have you inducted into Beauxbatons."

There are some instances where lying is a benefit to the client and the contractor. This is not one of them.

"The attack on the Delacour Mansion," I state simply.

Maxime's eyes widen at this, before narrowing almost immediately.

"And he hired a mere boy to protect his daughter?"

"Appearances can be deceiving ma'am."

"So they can," the headmistress says as she scrutinizes me, "But I still have my doubts."

"Do you trust Sebastian?" my sudden question catches her by surprise.

"I do. He is an honorable man. One of the few out there."

"Then you should trust his choice."

The hand lifts from my shoulder. I rub the spot absentmindedly.

"I trust his choice. I do not trust you."

"You are not the only one," I reply, thinking of Fleur.

Maxime shakes her head resignedly.

"We will get nowhere with this. Trust issues aside Mister Bayard, what are your intentions coming to this school?"

"To protect," I respond curtly.

"Your intentions to Miss Delacour?"

"To serve."

"And your intentions should her life be in danger?"

"To die."

Madam Maxime regards me with something akin to respect in her eyes.

"Not many bodyguards possess the same loyalty to their clients as you, Mister Bayard. Most go on to stab their clients in the back for the promise of more money."

"Then it appears that Sebastian should be trusted with his decision."

The headmistress smiles.

"Welcome to Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, Mister Bayard."

"Attention, students."

Madam Maxime's voice carried loud and strong over the Feasting Hall, and clattering sounds were heard as hundreds of forks and knives were placed away.

"The Triwizard Tournament will be a chance for you students to win glory and prestige for Beauxbatons. The professors and I have agreed on a list of competitors. These young men and women have all shown dedication in their studies and exhibited fine moral character. They will be spending the school year at Hogwarts and their schoolwork will mirror the curriculum offered by Headmaster Dumbledore. Professor Ambieu? Would you please read from the list?"

The wizened old man that was Beauxbaton's Transfiguration teacher stood from his chair and produced a piece of parchment.

"Ahem, hem," Ambieu's voice was like crackling paper and caused many of the gathered students to smile, "The selection process was long and arduous, for there are many fine ladies and gentlemen in this school. But we are proud to have chosen the lucky twenty that is to accompany the headmistress to Hogwarts. They are..."

Fleur ignored the names of the others that were being uttered, hoping to hear her own.

"... Ricard Vellanoise, Fleur Delacour, Claire Rousavall..."

The two friends happily hugged each other. Fleur was elated. To go and compete in the Tournament with Claire alongside her! It was something that had exceeded her dreams! And then her gaze rested on Bayard, who was still eating, and the smile that was on her face dimmed.

"Thank you Professor Ambieu," Madam Maxime was smiling as the aged wizard returned to his seat, "Now, before I let you continue eating, I have another announcement to make. An outstanding student has transferred to Beauxbatons, and the staff and I have decided that he would make a great addition to our Tournament Team. Please welcome, Mister Bayard."

The applause was lukewarm at best. Most of the students looked confused. Who was Bayard? Fleur didn't blame them. The boy was a stranger, to them and to her.

Then a shrill outburst came from the back.

"No! This is an atrocity! I will not allow it!"

Fleur groaned as she heard an all too familiar voice rise above the hall.

Jean-Claude Montague leapt from his seat, an expression of outrage plastered over his aristocratic features.

"A foreigner!" the young nobleman spat in disgust, "A foreigner is to represent Beauxbatons in the Tournament! That is a preposterous idea!"

The student body winced. Jean-Claude was the son of a powerful politician. Pure-blooded. A scion to the old ways. In short, a bigot backed by power and influence. Fleur crossed her arms. Montague had attempted to woo her once. He didn't get past the second sentence before the allure left him a drooling vegetable. Weak minded and weak willed. So Fleur had filed him under the Would-Not-Touch-With-A-Nine-Foot-Pole section of her mind and left it at that. Unfortunately, the idiot had made out her refusal to be a personal insult, and had maligned her mercilessly over the years. Fleur could only thank the heavens that Montague only had a small following or otherwise her life at Beauxbatons would be a living hell.

"I cannot believe I am the only one to affronted that this... pissant, will be one of the noble few to compete for the glory of our school!" more than a few students gasped at the insult, and Fleur gritted her teeth. Amazingly enough, Bayard seemed oblivious to the event that was being played out and continued eating as though nothing was happening.

"No! I will not allow it!" Jean-Claude continued his rant, and his corner full of lackeys nodded fervently in agreement, "I will take the place of the foreigner and show the other schools the elegance that comes from being a French pureblood!"

"You will do no such thing Mr. Montague," Madam Maxime's voice cuts in from the head table, "The students to compete in the Tournament have already been chosen. Any more from you and I will suspend you from this school!"

Jean-Claude's face turns red at once and his next words cause the temperature in the room to fall by several degrees.

"I will not allow myself to be talked down to by a half-giant harlot!"

Silence. Dead and utter silence.

Fleur was surprised. She had not expected this level of idiocy from Montague, but apparently the bigoted fool had spent the summer reinforcing his pro-blood stance. Madam Maxime slowly stood up, and Jean-Claude swallowed as his headmistress towered over the staff table.

"Mister Montague," Maxime's voice is calm and collected, but Fleur could sense the underlying danger behind her tone, "You are henceforth expelled from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. You may collect your things and leave."

"You can't do that!" any fear that Montague may have held for the headmistress swiftly evaporated, replaced by indignant anger, "You can't expel me when I am defending the honor of this school!"

"You will find that expelling a student is well within my rights."

"Fine," Jean-Claude sniffed imperiously, "This school will miss me more than I miss it."

"Then Beauxbatons must not like you very much, Montague," Fleur couldn't help but snipe. A faint wave of laughter supported her and caused the pureblood's eyes to narrow hatefully.

"Watch your mouth you Veela wench!"

Fleur moved for her wand but something, or someone, was much faster.

A blur of silver. A dull thud. Jean-Claude Montague slowly looked from Fleur to the dinner knife that now pinned his cloak to the table.

"Oh dear," came a voice from Fleur's left and breaking the silence that had settled, "It appears that my hand slipped."

Bayard smiled, his face friendly and apologetic. But his eyes. Harder than chips of ice.

Trembling, Jean-Claude wrestled with the eating utensil that was embedded in the table, but all he succeeded in doing was tearing the fabric from his sleeve. At the same time, Bayard moved from his seat and stood, the friendly expression still on his face.

"You will have to pardon me," the green-eyed boy said smoothly, "My hands have a slight problem you see. They tend to do... unpleasant... things to those without intelligence."

Jean-Claude puffed up his chest and glared at Bayard, the knife forgotten.

"How dare you insult me that way!"

"Insult?" Bayard spread his arms wide and adopted a look of innocence, "I am speaking only the truth. After all Montague. You are very stupid."

"I am the heir of a noble house! You will show me the respect I am due as a pureblooded wizard!"

"I do not show respect to inbred fools who cannot keep their mouths shut."

"You dare!" hissed Jean-Claude, sputtering with rage.

"I would like to leave you with a parting thought, Montague," Bayard cocked his head to one side, "But I'm afraid you would have no place to put it."

A wave of snickering spread throughout the hall and the nobleman clenched his wand angrily. Fleur reckoned if the pureblood's face turned any redder, he'd look like a beet. Bayard turned back to his table.

With a sneer, Montague raised his wand and pointed it to the unguarded back of his opponent.

I sense Montague moving. His wand is out. Coward. Mine is already spinning in my palm. So slow.

I wheel around, see him still in the motion of casting. An elaborate motion with his wrist and arm. Fancy, meaningless strokes. Eleven inches of blackened steel points to him. Wizards. Will they never learn? Strike fast and strike hard. Rule Number One. Leave the enemy dead before they can retaliate.

His mouth opens to form the words of the incantation. I can see his lips moving, forming syllables that have yet to be said. At least he brushes his teeth.

My silent Reducto smashes into his chest and flings him back with the force of an onrushing train.

My wand is back in its holster before he can land.

So.

Damn.

Slow.

Montague soars over the table full of his comrades and lands with a wet slapping sound. He slumps down to the floor, unconscious. The silence is glorious. I turn to regard the sea of shocked faces. My own twists upwards into a cruel smirk, the only smile I cannot fake, and the venom in my heart becomes words.

"Is there no one else?"

Fleur saw Montague flourishing his wand. Saw his eyes narrowed in hate. She wanted to shout a warning, anything. The words were on her tongue when Bayard moved, and she stared.

The boy spun on his heel in one fluid motion, wand spinning in his palm. Time seemed to slow. Montague's incantation had not yet passed from his lips, the pureblood's face still twisted into a savage scowl. Bayard's wand hand lashed out, and an incandescent beam



of light spat from the tip. Jean-Claude's body seemed to fold in on itself as the spell connected, and with a thunderclap of noise, was blasted backwards over the heads of his table.

Fleur had not even the time to blink.

Bayard's smile is still on his face, but the smile has turned feral. Bloodthirsty, almost. The boy's gaze could have frozen fire.

"Is there no one else?" he rasps, and half the hall flinched at his tone.

Fleur swallowed. The boy had just performed silent magic. That level of spellcasting was taught only in advanced courses at Beaxbatons. And even then, you were not expected to master it. Nonverbal magic required mental strength and discipline, and constant, tiring practice. Fleur herself knew a couple, but those were charms, and as much as she didn't like to admit it, she still had trouble focusing the words into a nonverbal command. What Bayard had just done was highly impressive, and Fleur found her interest in him was piqued even more.

No one had dared to challenge the boy after such a potent display of magic, and so Bayard had walked, no, stalked, towards Montague's table. The nobleman's goons shrank back in fear at the boy's approach, and one actually fell from his seat as he neared. Still smiling that feral smile Bayard yanked the knife from the table in one ruthless motion.

"I do believe this is mine."

A sharp clattering sound signified that another of Montague's henchmen had fainted into his plate.

Bayard turned fluidly, and crossed the distance between tables. Wordlessly, he slid back into his seat, and promptly began eating again.

"Fleur, Fleur."

Claire was tugging on her sleeve. The Veela witch turned from staring at the boy.

"What?"

Claire's eyes were wide as she regarded Bayard.

"I think I'm in love."

Madam Maxime's brows are furrowed as she surveys me. How she manages to capture elegance with such a common motion is an enviable talent.

"Being in the presence of the Headmistress twice on starting day would be a bad sign for the coming semester, no?" she says.

"Technically, only once, ma'am," I reply, "Considering the first was merely an introduction to the school."

She nods at this, but her gaze remains serious.

"I am well within my rights to expel you, Mister Bayard. Do you understand? Attacking a student with a wand is a serious offense. Mister Montague could even press charges if he is willing."

"I understand ma'am, and fully respect your decision should you choose to do so. However, with all due respect, I do not believe you will reach said decision."

"Oh?" Maxime raises her eyebrows, "Enlighten me, Mister Bayard, on why I will not decide to expel you."

"Montague drew his wand first. There is no law, even in school, that prevents a wizard from defending himself. Furthermore, if Montague is truly a pureblood, he will possess a most insufferable streak of pride. His father may ask why he was expelled, but to admit to being defeated by a transfer student so easily is something he will not do. Lastly, even if Montague decide to press the issue, his father would not allow it. A politician's son attacking another student? The press will have a field day."

"All that is true," the headmistress conceded, "Any other reasons?"

"Yes ma'am. Montague is a git."

Maxime tries to hide her snort of laughter by coughing, but fails.

"That is also true, Mister Bayard," then the smile disappears, replaced by sadness, "It shouldn't have happened, you know. The scene with Jean-Claude. He was such a promising boy when he attended his first class. Bright and eager to learn. Polite too. But the years he spent in his father's company. They poisoned him. Augustin Montague is a man you would not like to meet in public. His belief in the old ways borders on fanaticism."

"The old have a duty to teach the young," I respond, "But so often they teach the wrong things."

"Very insightful of you," Maxime sighs heavily, and a moment of silence elapses between the two of us. For a moment, the headmistress looks tired, weak almost. Then it is gone, replaced by her regal bearing once more. And it is with her stately mask locked in place that she next speaks to me.

"Tell me, Bayard, do you not fear the implications of dueling Mister Montague?"

"No, ma'am."

"His father has a fair amount of reputation with our Ministry."

"Yes, ma'am."

"The Montagues are a wealthy family. They can be the source of many problems for you in the future."

"Understood ma'am."

Maxime gives me an incredulous look.

"And you are not afraid of that?"

"No, ma'am."

"Would you mind explaining?"

I shrug.

"If Montague's father is anything like him, then it will be useless to fear. There are many people like them. Arrogant. Conceited. Willing to act based on emotion instead of logic. Whatever they can throw at me, be them threats or attacks, I can hurl back with equal, if not greater force."

Madam Maxime leans back into her chair.

"Then what do you fear, Mister Bayard?"

"I fear those that hide in the shadows, ma'am."

"Hide in the shadows?"

"Men who play to their strengths. Men who lurk behind a veneer of civility, hiding the darkness in their souls. Men who are content to wait as their plot unfolds and their pawns die left and right. These are the men I fear, Madam Maxime."

"Men like you?"

I smile at that, and Maxime winces at my expression.

"Yes, ma'am."

Unlike many magical schools, the student dormitories at Beauxbatons were communal. Decency was not enforced, but expected, and few were the occasions that said decency was breached. A great hall connected the boys' dorms with the girls', filled with tables for quiet sessions of study.

It was in one such table that Fleur sat, Claire beside her and gossiping with their mutual friend Amaline.

"Bayard has created quite a stir in the pureblood circle, you know," Amaline was saying, "It is always a nasty shock when your supposedly invulnerable leader falls."

"Montague had what was coming to him," Claire sniffed, "Bayard did right in putting that little dunce in his place."

"I do not think the purebloods mind," Fleur added in, "Many of them are honorable people, and do not kowtow to the stupidity Montague and his cohorts worship."

"Still, if I were Bayard," Amaline cautioned, "I would watch my back. Who knows when one of the more zealous purebloods decides on revenge."

"If you were Bayard, I'd be all over you," Claire batted her eyelashes flirtatiously.

The two broke into a fit of giggles. Fleur rolled her eyes.

The door connecting the hall to the rest of the school suddenly opened and revealed their topic of discussion. Fleur thought she caught a grimace on Bayard's face before it was gone, replaced with an easy-going smile. The boy walked towards their table, unmindful of the excited murmurs that had started at his entrance.

"Miss Delacour," he inclined his head towards her, before sliding fluidly in an empty seat at the opposite end of the table.

"Bayard," Fleur said neutrally, unsure how to respond after the incident with Montague. Her friends however, held no such lack of enthusiasm, and Fleur inwardly groaned as Claire thrust out her hand towards the boy.

"I am Claire Rousavall and this is Amaline Dusont," the excitable witch exclaimed, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Bayard."

Amaline nodded in agreement.

To their surprise, the boy just blinked at them. His eyes were glazed, and he seemed to staring off into space.

"Bayard?" Fleur asked hesitantly.

The boy blinked again, and his face lost the vacant expression it was holding before.

"My apologies ladies," he said smoothly, "It appears that twice I have committed the grievance of losing my focus before beautiful

girls. First with Miss Delacour. Now with you two. My humblest apologies."

Bayard finished by kissing the back of Claire's offered hand, causing a faint tinge of red to appear on the witch's cheek. He did the same to Amaline and caused the muggleborn to smile into her hand.

"You are forgiven Bayard," Claire gave him a wink, "But only if you will tell us what it was like."

"Like what?"

"Like kicking Montague's arse!"

The smile was back, full of sincerity. But it did not reach the eyes.

"Fast and disappointing."

"Like Montague's attempts at talking up a woman," came a strong voice. A wave of laughter spread, and Fleur looked to the owner of the voice.

Aimeric Duranceau strode regally towards their table, his stern features expressionless. The pureblood extended his hand, which Bayard clasped in a firm handshake.

"It is a delight to meet with the one who knocked Montague from his pedestal."

"It was not much of a pedestal," Bayard replied frankly.

"Still, you have 'kicked his arse'? As Miss Rousavall is fond of saying. That is something to be grateful for."

Bayard just smiled at that. Fleur was distinctively aware that a crowd was forming, regarding the transfer student with eager curiosity.

"What was the spell you used? Reducto?" Aimeric asked.

"It was."

The pureblood frowned at that.

"I may be mistaken, but Reducto is a blasting curse is it not? I recall it being used to blast things into tiny pieces. And unfortunately when I last saw Montague being dragged from the Feasting Hall, he was still in one piece."

"You are not mistaken," Bayard responded smoothly, "But the power behind the Reducto, like many other spells, can be altered to suit the caster's needs."

Aimeric raised an eyebrow at that.

"That is something I was not aware of."

Bayard nodded at the confession before continuing.

"Reducto was first used during the time of the Roman Empire. In England actually. Hadrian's Wall to be exact. The Roman War Mages called it "Foehammer". Dead useful in clearing barbarians from the ramparts. Then, the curse was at its barest form, and could only physically "push". Later generations of wizards improved it to the Reducto we use today."

Aimeric stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"If there is a lower level of this spell, then I assume there is a higher level as well?"

"A low level Reducto will hurl you twenty feet," Bayard gestured, "A medium level one will shatter every bone in your body and liquefy your organs," the boy smirked at the ocean of wincing following his statement, "A high level Reducto will pulp you into a fine paste. Provided of course your body parts don't fly off from the immense pressure."

"Why didn't you use a high leveled one on Montague?" asked a second year in the crowd.

"I didn't want to leave a bloody soup on the hall floor. Bad taste you know. Especially on my first day here."

The crowd laughed. But Fleur had the impression Bayard was only half joking.

It was Aimeric that brought the laughter to an end.

"You performed the spell silently."

"I did," Bayard confirmed.

"Reducto is a curse that is difficult to use without the incantation. Most silent spells I have seen used are charms."

"Correct again," the boy smiled disarmingly.

"So then how did you do it? It shouldn't be possible at your level, begging your pardon."

Bayard winked at the pureblood.

"Would you believe it if I said from hours and hours of practice?"

"No," Aimeric admitted, "Not really."

"Ah. Well then. From hours and hours of practice."

Even Fleur had to laugh at that. Aimeric smiled before continuing on.

"You mentioned altering the level of a spell. How does that work exactly?"

Bayard's countenance changed, the smile gone, supplanted by a serious expression.

"Magic is like a flowing river," he explained, "Forever changing. Rippling like a tide in a pond. What they teach you here is how to harness its power in its natural state. Some spells are raw and powerful because the magics that sustain them are raw and powerful. Others are weak because the magic entwined within them is merely a stream compared to an ocean. What they don't teach you is how to change the strength into weakness and the weakness into strength. A sailor may teach you how to sail the seas, but he cannot instruct you on changing the depth of the ocean."

"And that is possible?" asked a girl with glasses and braided hair, "Changing the depth of the ocean?"



The smile came back, in full force. The boy took out his wand, and Fleur noticed the practiced ease at which the wand hand moved.

"Observe," Bayard whispered and pointed his wand at her, "Incendio."

A collected gasp arose, accompanied by more than a few screams. Fleur tensed, expecting a jet of searing flame to come howling for her. The Shielding Charm was halfway to her lips when she realized no jet of flame was incoming.

A bright orange ember danced on Bayard's wand tip, aglow with warmth. The cinder was in constant motion, rippling hypnotically, enticing the onlookers with its welcoming heat. Fleur swallowed. Claire and Amaline was staring at the flame and then to Bayard, and then back to the flame. Aimeric looked stunned.

"Of course," the boy said, his words the now sole voice in the hall, "when you are sufficiently attuned with the flow of magic, material conduits like wands become a commodity instead of a necessity."

The flame disappeared, and the wand was put down. Bayard held out his hand and whispered Incendio again.

Fire came, bright and warm. But instead of on the wand, the ember danced on the boy's fingertip.

"How... How..." stuttered Aimeric, his usually stoic expression gone.

The boy continued on as though if he never heard, and made the cinder crawl around his hand like a fiery spider. It scuttled and skulked. Leapt and danced. Like it had a life of its own. A snap of his fingers, and the flame disappeared again. Bayard winked at them all and then stuck out his tongue. There the ember burned bright once more, in a swaying, undulating motion that seemed to taunt them with the impossibility of it all.

Bayard quenched the flame on his tongue and noticed the awe-struck looks he was being given. The smile, that damned, charming smile came back.

"Would you believe if I said hours and hours of hard work?"

### Chapter 3: Many Meetings

"Mulwerk, Nathaniel!"

She dared to hope. Pleaded to the Fates.

"Ravenclaw!"

Begged the heavens for this one chance.

"Patterson, Henry!"

Just one. To make things right again.

"Gryffindor!"

Please let him come back soon.

"Pilkins, Samantha!"

To see him safely by her side.

"Hufflepuff!"

Please. Please. Please!

"Rowry, Arthur!"

Disappointment. It washed over her and threatened to drown her in its lapping waves. Dumbledore placed a comforting hand over her own. It did nothing but stir the guilt into a frenzied storm.

Lily Potter dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief. Another year would pass without Harry. Another year without news of her lost son.

It hurt to see all these new students here, while not a single one possessed that unruly mop of black hair and those emerald green eyes. Lily had held onto the hope that maybe a Hogwarts letter would find its way to Harry, someday, somehow. That was the main reason she had accepted the position as the professor for Muggle Studies. In the hopes of seeing one day a happy Harry striding down the Great Hall to meet the family that had never forgotten him.

It was a dream of hers. James would laugh as he embraced his son, mirror images of one another. Adam would come bounding from the Gryffindor table with an eager smile on his face. The brothers would grasp each other in a fierce hug, and Adam would regale Harry with his tales of Hogwarts. And her? She would stand back and watch happily as the family was reunited, whole and complete once again.

It was a dream of hers, but now, as the sixth year passed without word or sight of Harry, it seemed that the dream would never become reality.

Lily Potter wiped the last few tears from her eyes and straightened into her seat. The students must not see her like this.

Perhaps next year.

Perhaps.

"What's wrong Adam?" Hermione, always the perspective one, asked across the Gryffindor table.

"It's nothing," the Boy-Who-Lived replied, tearing his gaze away from her mother to look at his friend, "It's just my mum. She always gets this way after the Sorting Ceremony."

Ron stopped shoveling food into his mouth and looked up from his plate.

"Is she still hoping your brother will come back? Even after all these years?"

Adam nodded sadly, and picked at his mashed potatoes with his fork.

"She never gave up hope. I don't think she ever will."

"But Adam, it's been six years!" Hermione exclaimed, "If Harry was alive, he'd come back before then right?"

"I don't know," the Gryffindor ran a hand through his brown hair, "To be honest, if I was Harry, I wouldn't want to come back."

"What do you mean?"

"We were jerks to him, Hermione. Me, my dad, and my mum."

The bushy haired bookworm gasped.

"Your parents didn't hit him did they?"

"No! Nothing like that!" Adam said hastily, "We just kinda ignored him. Like he didn't exist."

"That's awful!"

"You didn't know Adam before First Year Hermione," Ron added, "I did. Met him with my family when I was seven. He was a prat."

"Ronald!"

"No, Hermione, it's true," Adam sighed, "I was an idiot back then. Spoiled like no other. Caught in the hype of being the Boy-Who-Lived. My parents too. I don't really know how, but we just gradually pushed Harry away. I think we just considered the three of us as a family and left Harry out. It took him leaving to realize what arseholes we've been."

"Well didn't you go out and look for him?"

"We did," Adam's expression grew pained, "But we didn't even know when he left. Dumbledore was the one to find out Harry was missing. He went up the stairs and then came down. I'll never forget how furious he was."

"I remember that," Ron said as he chewed on his steak, "The Headmaster flooed in to the Burrow and asked my mum and dad to help look. Bill and Charlie went too."

"They looked all over, but they never found him," Adam shook his head, "Time went on without news from Harry. My dad lost hope after the first year. He just finally gave up. Never been the same since. My mum hasn't though. That's why she took the job here at Hogwarts. She thinks Harry might show up one day to be Sorted."

"What about you Adam? Have you given up hope?"

The Boy-Who-Lived looked pensive, and then sighed again.

"I want him back, Hermione. I really do. But at the same time, I don't."

Ron gave him an incredulous look.

"Why not?"

"I think he will be bitter. Harry that is. I know I would be. I don't think he'll get along with us if he came back. I don't blame him. Merlin, after the way we've treated him, he's more likely to befriend the Malfoys than us. But it's my mum that I'm worried about. I don't think her heart can take it, if Harry decides he wants nothing to do with her."

"But you're Harry's family right?" Hermione furrowed her brows, "Even if hates you at first, he'll come around in the end?"

"And that's what I'm afraid of," Adam shot one last look at the staff table where Lily sat, "I don't think my mum can live on if she knows Harry hates her."

I hear the clang of plated boots on stone. The melancholy tone of steel joints. The soft whisper of a tattered cloak sweeping across the floor. The figure moves to stand beside me, gauntleted hand resting on the pommel of a sheathed sword.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I say softly to him, looking off into the distance.

"Tis a red sun," the voice that comes back is heavy and thick, sounding of grating metal, "Bad portents for the future to come. Bloodshed, most like."

"And since when has bloodshed been a bad portent for the both of us?" I reply, my gaze still resting on the setting sun.

"Never," the figure admits and falls silent.

I smile.

"Hello Hate," I turn to see his iron visage staring at me.

"Greetings, my lord," he bows stiffly, encumbered by his dress of plate.

"I did not call for you."

"You did not," a further moment of silence elapses between the two of us before he begins again, "But I am concerned."

"Concerned?"

"Aye, lord. We are journeying to Hogwarts, no? English lands? I am concerned we will meet them."

"Them," my lips form words I will never utter again in this lifetime. Mother. Father. Brother. "Perhaps they will be there. Perhaps they will not. It doesn't matter. We will fulfill our contract all the same and then we will be gone."

"I am worried, lord. Merely worried. You hold no lingering affection in your heart for them?"

A moment of doubt. Like a fleeting wind. I push it away.

"Six years, Hate. Six years. Six years I have not seen their faces. They are strangers to me now."

"They are your family," emerald fire regards me from behind the steel visor, "They are your blood."

"Then my blood must have been exceptionally weak."

Silence falls between us again, heavy and despondent. Hate breaks it by cracking his knuckles.

"I have always wanted to meet them," I can hear him smiling through his armor even though he wears no face, "This family of yours. To see for myself how they could have created a monster."

"Am I a monster, Hate?"

Joints creak as he swivels his neck to stare at me.

"You have to be to create me."

I chuckle at that.

Another sound. Distant but getting closer. Footsteps.

"Someone comes," Hate growls.

"Indeed."

"Whenever you need me, my lord..." he reminds me.

"I will call for you."

He nods and fades, disappearing back into the shadows.

I force a pleasant smile onto my face.

Fleur was surprised to see Bayard in her favorite spot. The highest tower in Beauxbatons Palace was used to house the students' owls as well as provided the nicest view of the immense school grounds. The quarter-Veela often came to this spot for the solitude it provided, to enjoy a few minutes of peace before returning to her quarters. But now the boy was here, looking at her with that damnable grin.

"You left the Commons in an uproar, you know," she said, more to start the conversation than anything else.

"Oh dear," Bayard looked innocent, "Should I go back and repair the damage?"

"No. All the students are in bed by now, except the senior years. I do expect you will have much to explain tomorrow morning though."

"Fair enough," was the reply.

Fleur moved to join the boy near the tower's railing.

"I did not expect you to be a connoisseur of scenery, Bayard."

"I'm not," the boy admitted, "I just like to stand in really high places."

Fleur rose an elegant eyebrow.

"I find that hard to believe."

"Bird's eye view of things. I can keep a clear track of everything and anything below me. The scenery is just an added bonus."

"That is a strange way of thinking."

"I'm not exactly normal," Bayard grinned lopsidedly.

Fleur frowned. And then turned back to watching the setting sun.

"Do you think there really will be a danger," she said after a while, "In me attending the Tournament?"

"If you were anybody else, probably not," the boy said cheerfully, "But you're the Minster of Magic's daughter. Men seeking leverage with your father will target you."

"I don't want him to worry," Fleur whispered sadly, "My father that is. But I need this. I need to show everyone that it's just not the Veela that makes me Fleur Delacour."

"And what's wrong with being a Veela?" Bayard asked.

Fleur scoffed.

"You haven't seen what happens to men when my allure is at its strongest. And the women? They think I'm trying to steal their boyfriends."

The boy nodded sympathetically.

"If it helps any, I'll be around."

Fleur glanced at Bayard in surprise.

"You don't act like any bodyguard I've met. Most are overprotective and treat me like a child."

"Wrong types of bodyguards then."

"There is a right type of bodyguard?" Fleur challenged.



"Definitely. If he has a stunning smile and brilliant green eyes, then you know he's the right type of bodyguard."

Fleur hid her smile behind her hand.

"It is refreshing to meet someone who is willing to be truthful. You do not deny my father hiring you?"

The boy appeared embarrassed. Fleur was surprised to find herself thinking he looked cute.

"It was your father's idea, actually. This cousin act. He is afraid of your temper."

"I do not blame him. Though only pure Veela can change forms when angered, we still inherit their fiery temper. My mother has not told him that yet. Perhaps he fears I will start hurling fireballs at him?"

"I do not think it is that," Bayard looked thoughtful, "Your father is a man who values his family above all else. He fears not your Veela inheritance, but your love. He fears that maybe one day he will commit a mistake you will never forgive."

"I have never thought of that before," Fleur admitted, more than a little ashamed.

"Man's greatest weakness is women. That goes double when said man has a daughter."

"Full of little pieces of wisdom are you?"

"I pick 'em up in my line of work," the boy winked, and the quarter-Veels smiled in response.

"I have wronged you, Bayard," her bodyguard seemed surprised at her words, "For attempting the allure on you when we first met."

"You were suspicious," Bayard shrugged indifferently, "And it was... interesting... for me at least."

Fleur blushed, and looked away.

"Still, it was wrong of me to do so. And I apologize."

For a response, the boy stuck out his hand.

"Friends?"

Feeling slightly childish, but also strangely elated, Fleur Delacour accepted the offered hand and shook it firmly.

"Friends," she confirmed.

"Wonderful!" Bayard exclaimed.

"But now that we are friends," Fleur continued, "you must tell me about your life."

"Ahhh. Become my friend to learn about my past eh? That's very cunning of you Miss Delacour."

"Friends learn about each other, Bayard. Or are you insinuating we are not friends?"

"Not be friends with a beautiful girl? What am I? Crazy?" Fleur just glared at him, "Hmph. Alright. Fine. It is a long story, though," Bayard seemed thoughtful, and then smiled, "So I'll try to cut out all the boring parts. Parents never paid any attention to me. My brother was a celebrity. I was just the castoff. So I upped and left. Lived off the streets. Already knew magic by then and without adults to supervise me, I was free to... experiment... with my abilities. Found work. A few years later, I'm here, contracted to defend a beautiful girl," a wink came with the smile, but Fleur ignored it.

"There are holes in your story," the quarter-Veela pointed out, "Many, many holes."

"All the holes are boring parts, I'm afraid."

"And no doubt important parts as well," Fleur shot back.

"You asked for a quick description of my life, not a biography."

"But your description is just unbelievable!"

"Is it?" the boy smiled winningly at her.

"Yes! It is! Neglectful parents I might believe, but running away and surviving for this long? You should've been no older than eight or nine!"

"I had help."

"And experimenting with magic? How could you have done that at such a young age?"

"The help gave me some more help."

"And a job? You are not old enough to be employed anywhere in the Wizarding World!"

"The help that gave me some more help proved to be especially helpful in this regard."

"You are being deliberately infuriating, aren't you?" Fleur snapped.

"Miss Delacour," the charming smiled refused to fade, "I am a bodyguard. It is my job to be infuriating."

Fleur sent a jolt of her allure at him. Half in curiosity and half in anger.

Bayard's features slackened, and his body relaxed. His mouth parted slightly and a glazed look appeared in his eyes. Fleur blinked. And then blinked again. She was sure that he had been immune at the manor. But now, the boy looked worse off than Montague! The quarter-Veela swallowed bitter disappointment. She had hoped that this friend would last. And if she was being truthful with herself, she had hoped he would last more than any other. Perhaps the immunity had come from a potion. It didn't matter now. Now that she knew.

"You will go away and never speak of this conversation again," Fleur tried not to look sad as she ordered.

"I will go away and say that Fleur Delacour believes I am the handsomest man alive."

She started.

"I didn't say that!"

"Yes you did," the boy droned in a listless tone.

"I told you to go away and never mention this conversation!"

"You told me to go into the deepest part of the forest and cut down the tallest tree I find with a herring."

And then she caught the glint of mischief in those emerald eyes. She couldn't help herself. She laughed.

The glazed expression disappeared from Bayard's face instantly.

"Do I get a reward for making you laugh?"

"You are a very interesting person, Bayard," Fleur answered, and the smile that she gave him was warm enough to melt an ice giant's heart, "I think I will like being friends with you."

Lance Thorton sauntered into the room, an easygoing smile on his face. The American saw a gaggle of unusually dressed people lounging in comfortable armchairs. Some were huddled together, conversing in low tones. Judging from their serious expressions, Lance guessed the contract was either extremely dangerous or extremely profitable. Hopefully both.

A few heads turned to regard the newcomer in their midst, but none called out in greeting.

Lance chuckled softly. Not that he could blame them. Bounty hunting never did make many friends. The American glided through the crowd, and found a seat next to a bored looking German.

"Heya Kaiser," Lance slapped the man on the shoulder.

"Gunslinger," came the uninterested reply.

"Still alive and kicking eh? Thought we lost you a few months back in Brazil."

"Complications I took care of," Kaiser rubbed his square jaw.

"I bet. No one can down the Kaiser in a straight up fight."

"Hmm."

Lance brushed away the German's aloofness. He was well used to it by now, having worked with the man numerous times before. In fact, were it not for them being in the same line of work, Lance was sure they would have been friends. Turning, the American wrapped an arm around a burly Mongolian clad in furs.

"And my old buddy from the steppes is here as well! How could this day not get any better?"

The man shrugged off Lance's arm, and returned to polishing his scimitar.

"Mongol still remember Gunslinger's words. Gun better than blade. Mongol look forward to day when Gunslinger eats his own words."

"Oh come on now. I say one bad thing about you and forget about all the good things?"

"Gunslinger always say bad things about Mongol," the man produced a whetstone from beneath his furs and began grinding it against his weapon, "Never good."

"That's a dirty lie! I've said plenty of good things about you!"

The wizard nomad glared at him.

"Name one."

"Well, you know. That one time? In Korea? Where I said you smelled really good?"

"I remember. You say Mongol smell like piss from an old goat."

"Exactly!"

"That is not something good."

"Well, fine. But if a woman tells me I smell like goat piss, I'd think she was flirting with me."

"If you flirt with Mongol, Mongol will kill you."

Lance chuckled.

"Easy brother, I'm just joshin' with ya," the American nudged the herdsman turned bounty hunter, "So I hear this contract is gonna be something big. Something about snatching a politician's daughter."

Mongol shrugged.

"Not concern Mongol whose daughter it is. Mongol just want the gold."

"Amen, brother. Amen."

The doors swung open again, and a trio of men stepped in, wearing stately dress robes. Lance whistled. They looked to be pureblood politicians, judging from their expensive garments and the way they carried themselves. The American wanted to laugh as one of the men, a middle-aged man with striking blue eyes, sniffed imperiously as he traversed through the throng of lounging bounty hunters.

The three men sat down behind the room's only table, and the youngest, a Ministry drudge if Lance guessed right, spoke in a heavy French accent.

"Greetings ladies and gentlemen. It iz an honor to have you here."

"Get to the point Frenchie," Lance called out, "We ain't here on paid leave!"

A chorus of assent from the group of mercenaries supported the American. The Frenchman looked momentarily flustered, but regained his earlier flair and spoke again.

"Yes, yes. Of course. It iz good to zee that so many are willing to get straight to ze point."

The pureblood cleared his throat and tapped his wand on the table. Instantly, a picture of a beautiful girl with long, blonde hair

shimmered into existence, hovering over the bounty hunters. More than a few cat-calls were heard as the men gave voice to their appreciation. Lance whistled again. The girl was stunningly beautiful.

"Zis," the flunky began, "iz Fleur Delacour. Beloved daughter to ze French Prime Minister of Magic. It iz our hope that someone amongst you can bring zis girl to us, into our possession. In return, you will be paid a most handsome amount for your troubles."

"Why?" Kaiser asked, still looking bored, "Why do you want her? Besides you three wanting to get laid."

All three men turned red as their audience laughed.

"It iz not that!" the middle-aged Frenchman spat, "Ze noble house of Montague will never resort to zuch perversity! We need her because of her father!"

"So you want to get lucky with her father?" Lance retorted, "Alright then, but I think asking the man himself would be a better option than hiring us to ask him out for you."

The laughs came harder now, and Lance winced as Mongol punched him in the arm softly.

"No! You mizunderstand! The girl's father is married to a half-blood aberration! It iz a shame against our noble traditions! He must be made to realize that it iz blood that makes us strong! The reforms he will push through our Ministry will bring ze downfall of our culture! Zat must not be allowed! He must be controlled! And if zat means taking his daughter for leverage, zan so be it!"

The room quieted, and a significant portion of the mercenary throng stared at the three Frenchmen with expressions of disgust. It was Lance that put their thoughts into a single word.

"Bigots."

Montague, from the noble house of Montague, Lance surmised, glared at him.

"Excuze me?"

"You heard me," the American drawled, "The three of you are bigots," he raised his hand to stop Montague from what was no doubt the beginning of an outraged rant, "However, we're in the business of doing things no one else will do, so if it's a politician's daughter you want all trussed up, then I'll make sure she's all wrapped up with a pretty red bow for ya."

The room's occupants nodded in agreement. Kaiser was next to speak.

"Does the girl have anyone guarding him?"

"Yes," Montague snapped, "A boy. Ze Minister haz no doubt lost his mind in hiring a boy to guard his precious daughter, but that makes it all the easier for us to capture her."

"Wait," Lance called out, "The boy. Emerald eyes? Messy hair? Scar on the forehead?"

Montague looked affronted at the American's interruption.

"Yes," the pureblood sneered, "Zat iz an adequate description of him."

"Oh. You should've said that sooner," Lance stood up and stretched, "Well I'm outta here. Thanks but no thanks. Catch you all later."

"But you have not even heard ze reward we are offering," the younger Frenchman exclaimed in surprise.

"I don't need to. Green eyes? Messy hair? Fuck that. It's Templar. Now I'm a gambling man in a gambler's profession, but there ain't nothing on this good old Earth you can offer me to face Templar."

"Templar?" Montague asked, confusion etched on his pale face. Some of the bounty hunters looked just as confused, but most were voicing agreement at Lance's words, "Who iz zat?"

"The boy who is guarding your target," retorted Kaiser, still lounging on the armchair, "Gunslinger is right. Not good business for us. Can't get the reward if we're dead."



"Templar? Gunslinger?" the trio of Frenchmen looked even more confused.

"Most bounty hunters have a call-name," Lance said in his talking-to-an-idiot tone and was delighted when the stuffy purebloods growled back at him, "I'm Gunslinger. The German gentleman that just spoke is Kaiser. The big black guy back there," he jerked his thumb towards a broad chested African with a grim face, "is Zulu. That beautiful lady smoking a cigarette? Valkyrie. There's the old Chinese man, Foxfire. You've got Mongol playing around with his scimitar. Amazon and her damn voodoo hijinks. And a whole butt-load of others."

"And how does zis affect the contract?"

Lance laughed.

"See, Montague, we all know each other. We might not all be friends," a few snorted and the American smiled, "But we damn well respect each other. And Templar? Well you can be damned sure we respect him."

"He is just a boy," said a cultured voice. A black-haired beauty stood up, hand on the hilt of a katana, "And it is dishonorable to fear a boy."

"Japanese bitch knows nothing," snapped Foxfire. The old wizard tapped his gnarled staff on the floor, "Still think it Fifteenth Century. Power not lie in age. Power lie in strength."

The woman's eyes narrowed.

"For all your posturing, at least I do not fear a boy."

A wave of chuckles spread throughout the room.

"Templar is not just a boy," Zulu spoke up, his tone gravelly and hard, "You don't mess with him."

"You are new to this work, girl," Kaiser shrugged carelessly, "Don't dwell on things you don't understand."

"Vell I vould like to know what dis Templar is all about," a thickset Russian crossed his arms stubbornly.

"He can't be that special," the Ministry flunky added in resolutely.

"Oh he's just like us. At first glance," Lance grinned, "Chatting and joking before the job. Has a cunning sense of humor and a wit sharper than a knife. Just another bounty hunter looking forward to his reward. But then the time comes, you see. And his eyes get all cold and hard. And that easygoing grin he's been wearing all this time? Well that's gone too, and you might as well be staring at stone. The wards are down. You all go in, and the Templar's there, at the front, casting spells faster than you can blink. No stunners. No Body-Binds. Just straight out killing. High-powered Reductos. Diffindos toward the vitals. Any spell that can kill, the Templar will use it. And that look he gets on his face when he's killing? Well, I've seen it before and if there was a Hell on this world, the kid's gaze can freeze it."

"Zat iz impossible!" Montague scoffed, though he looked distinctly uneasy, "He iz just a boy!"

"If only," Lance rolled his eyes, "The kid's a fiend in dueling, but I reckon me, Kaiser, and Mongol can take him down together," both men nodded at him, but didn't look pleased at the prospect, "But that's the thing. When you hire Templar, he comes in a two-for-one package."

"A two-for-one package?" the Japanese woman glowered, "What does that mean?"

"There's a reason we call him Templar," Lance winked.

"The boy and his knight," Kaiser said respectfully.

"A knight?" the younger Frenchman jeered, "You mean one of those muggles that wears those ridiculous armor costumes? How can you be afraid of that?"

It was Zulu that answered.

"Just as the boy is more than a boy, the knight is more than a knight. It is something unnatural."

"He a demon of old, stuck in tin can. Want to get out to eat our souls," Foxfire nodded at the wisdom in his own words.

"A noble warrior of the Holy Roman Empire, who lost his life on the battlefield," Kaiser looked serious, even though his posture remained slack, "Now returned to do his duty once more."

"A man who lost his lover to the arms of another," Valkryie amended, tracing the faint scar on her cheek, "And possessed a suit of armor so he can have his revenge."

Lance saw the lost expressions that some in the room were wearing and grinned again.

"See, we don't exactly know who the knight is. Hell, we don't even know what the knight is. All we know, is its devotion to the boy. If the job is hard, the kid will have the knight by his side, and you know that shit is gonna hit the fan. It's this big, hulking suit of armor you see, with a big ol' sword to boot. And if you think this is just some poorly pieced together work of magic, well, you're dead wrong. The damned thing moves almost as fast as the kid, and that big sword of his you can't even see if he swings at you."

"They work as a team," Kaiser explained further, "The knight shields the boy from harm. Has a kite shield that deflects spells. We think it may be enchanted. Meanwhile, the boy's blasting from range, taking down targets that the knight can't reach with his sword. Quite a lethal pair. But that's not the best part..."

"Oh no, definitely not," Lance grinned again, "The kid has a face as hard as stone. The knight doesn't have a face. If you glance into that helm he wears, you see two orbs of fire glaring back at you, but nothing else. It's creepy as fuck."

"A demon of old," Foxfire repeated, "Come to buy bargain goods from Walmart and steal our souls."

"Superstitious talk," the Russian snorted, "I am sure it is all nothing."

"You believe what you want to believe," Lance shrugged, "But you can offer me a coven of Veela and all the gold in the world and I still wouldn't face Templar."

"Do you fear death that much?" the woman with the katana hissed, "Are you that much of a coward?"

Lance's smile dropped.

"Listen here, girl," the American's voice had lost all traces of pleasantness, "We are in the profession of death. Hunting down Dark Wizards. Killing magical beasts that can lay waste to an entire city. That is what we do, and that is what we excel at. Everyone here is no stranger to death. We expect it. It can come for you around any corner, and you come to grips very quickly with the fact that the next breath you take may be your last. I have seen death. Seen it come for my friends and my enemies. Watched it take them away peacefully and watched it drag them away kicking and screaming. None of us here fear death. But just cuz we don't fear death doesn't mean we go seeking it. And that's exactly what's gonna happen if we face Templar. We go in. He eviscerates us. We die. Shit, that's not something I want happening to me in a long while."

"To fight Templar is like fighting the hordes of the great Khan," Mongol spoke up, "To defend invites overwhelming attack. To attack invites impenetrable defense. You alone will go in with your pride and you will come back without your head."

"The kid's got morals though," Valkryie smirked, "Won't kill women or children. A couple of years ago I was on the opposite side of the contract. Money was good. Facing Templar was not. Broke my leg in three different places and shattered my left arm. Didn't kill me though. If I wasn't screaming in pain I'd ask for his number."

"Ahhh and the closet pervert shows her fondness for the unthinkable," Lance smiled at Valkryie's annoyed expression, "I kid, I kid."

"You are all making dis up," the Russian said resolutely, "I have not heard of dis 'Templar'. You are trying to scare us from taking the contract."

Most of the mercenaries in the room looked amused.

"All of you may not fear death, but shirking a contract just because of some boy is still cowardice," the Japanese woman snarled, "I will see for myself just how impressive this boy is."

Lance chuckled.

"Lady, just for that, I'm willing to pay gold to see Templar stomp your sorry ass to the curb."

## Chapter 4: Hogwarts

The Beauxbatons carriage was a marvelous product of wizarding ingenuity. It was a relic from the old days, when muggles still relied on horse for transport and wars were fought with musket and lead. Built to be near impenetrable, with layered charms that made the strongest winds feel like a slight bump in the road. And thus, most of the Beauxbatons contingent was asleep, quartered in their own rooms, undisturbed by the howling gales that whipped outside.

Fleur covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a yawn. It was late. Very late. The quarter-Veela looked blearily across the carriage's expanded commons. Claire was with her, looking on with interest as Bayard gestured animatedly to a bemused Aimeric.

"What are they talking about?" Fleur's question caused Claire to turn in her seat.

"Spell theory. They've been talking for hours," the French witch shook her head, "Mostly Bayard though. He's trying to explain it to Aimeric, but from the snippets I've been hearing, it's quite complicated."

"How long till we arrive at Hogwarts?"

"Not in a few hours, I'm afraid," Claire chuckled at her friend's dark mutterings, and nudged the quarter-Veela, "So Fleur, any other thoughts regarding Bayard?"

Fleur shook her head gracefully.

"He is too young for me."

"Hmm," Claire pursed her lips, "You know, I hear quite a few girls have asked him out already."

Fleur tried to look uninterested but failed.

"Jacqueline was talking about how he turned down her offer the other day. I have never seen a girl so exhilarated and disappointed at the same time."

"He is too young for me," Fleur said again, more firmly this time.

"But not for Jaqueline? She's only a year behind you Fleur."

"It is the principle of the matter. And besides, Bayard has been a very good friend to me these past few days. I do not want to lose that. He is also my bodyguard. There is nothing that can happen between us."

"You never know, Fleur. It might happen. Better to try now and then discover that there is something only to find he is already in the arms of another witch."

Fleur was surprised she felt the tiniest stab of jealousy. It shouldn't be there. Bayard was a bodyguard. He would be gone in a year. Forgotten as an interesting man but just that in Fleur Delacour's life. But still, the jealousy was there, a complexity that Fleur was not sure she could understand.

Claire smiled knowingly at her friend's troubled expression.

"I do not think we will be a suitable match," Fleur said after a moment of thought.

"You will never know until you try."

"I do not even know what he is like."

"He's charming, likeable, attractive, and funny. Now you know what he is like."

"Why are you pushing me towards him, Claire?" Fleur glowered at her friend, "You've never been this persistent about a boy before."

"Yes, because they were just boys, Fleur," Claire sighed at the quarter-Veela's confused expression, "But, Bayard. He is more than that. There is something more to him. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it. He's just not just another pretty face. Beauxbatons has plenty of those. He is... different."

"Different does not always mean good," Fleur pointed out.

"No, it doesn't, but so far, in Bayard's case, different does mean good. He is immune to your allure. He doesn't gawk and gape at you.

You can be happy, sad, or even angry at him and he'll return those emotions, not just look at you with drool hanging from his mouth. Being smart, funny, and attractive is just the icing on the cake."

"There are others who can fight off the allure. I've met them before," Fleur argued.

"But completely? There are boys in Beauxbatons who can also fight off some of your allure, Aimeric being one," Claire gestured to the handsome pureblood still in conversation with Bayard, "But they become like any other if you pour all your strength into it."

"I sent all my allure at him when he was at the mansion," the quarter-Veela admitted, "He shrugged it off and told me we would be late to dinner."

"There!" Claire declared triumphantly, "He's the perfect match for you."

"It's not just the allure," Fleur shook her head, "You can't just say we're a match because he's immune to the allure. There has to be something else."

"Love?" Claire asked.

Fleur nodded.

"Something like that."

"But love doesn't just appear like that, Fleur," her friend explained patiently, "It just doesn't magically link two people together. Most love is gradual. Slow. You just can't suddenly find it."

"And you think I will find love in Bayard?" the quarter-Veela asked, almost challengingly.

Claire gave her a sympathetic look.

"No. I don't. But he's a good starting place as any."

"Lils!"



Lily Potter turned to see her husband running towards her, a goofy grin plastered over his face.

"James?" the Muggle Studies professor wondered, "What are you doing here?"

The red-robed wizard clasped his wife in a loving embrace before speaking again.

"Triwizard Tournament, love. The minister dispatched two full squads of aurors to guard the event. Sirius is here too!" James waved towards his long-time friend, who gave a cheery grin in return. The man bounded up, sporting an equally red robe, though his was not nearly as neat and tidy-looking as James's.

"Two auror captains at the same place. We're sure to attract the ladies!" Sirius threw an arm around James.

"Sorry Sirius, but I'm already taken," James wagged his eyebrows at his wife, who smiled faintly. Concerned, James looked down at the red-haired witch. "Is something wrong Lils?"

"Nothing, James... It's just that... that... Harry didn't come back this year..."

At once, the auror captain's face seemed to age, and his body stiffened as though struck. Sirius moved his grip until his hand rested firmly on James's shoulder, providing support.

"It's alright Lils," James whispered encouragingly, even though grief was apparent on his face, "He'll come back some day. He has to. He's our Harry."

"Oh James..." Lily sobbed, "We failed him... We failed him didn't we?"

"We did, but we can make up for it," the auror captain's eyes seemed to gleam with zeal, "I know we can Lils. If he comes back, we'll treat him right... Like he should have been treated. Like our son."

"But what if he never comes back James?"

"He'll have to," James said sadly "He's our son, Lils. Somehow, he'll come back, and everything will be right again."

"What if he hates us? What if he wants nothing to do with us?"

"Then we'll wait, Lily. We'll be here waiting for him until he's ready to accept us."

The redhead nodded, and placed her head on her husband's shoulder.

"James, Lily," Sirius started hesitantly, and the couple turned to look at their friend, "We should get going. The Beauxbatons and Durmstrang delegates are almost here."

"I need to be there with Sirius to guard the foreigners," James detached himself from his wife's embrace, "Stay safe Lils. Don't... Don't think about him too much."

Lily smiled through her tears.

"Be careful James. I'll be there with you after I collect myself."

Lily Potter was running for the Great Hall. She needed to be there for the welcoming of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students. From the applause she had heard earlier, it was apparent that the delegates from one of the schools had already arrived. The Muggle Studies professor cursed her moment of weakness. The pained look James had given her after she mentioned Harry was heartbreaking, and it wore heavily on her conscience.

Another round of applause, closer this time, and Lily's run became a full pelt sprint. She could just imagine the disapproving glare the Deputy Headmistress would send her.

She rounded the corner, saw the light blue uniforms of Beauxbatons students seating themselves at the Ravenclaw table, and skid to a halt, nearly running over a student in the process.

Gathering her wits about her, Lily smiled apologetically at the boy, who was wearing Beauxbatons robes.

"I'm so sorry-"

The boy peered back at her with emerald orbs, so eerily familiar, and Lily's apology died in her mouth, replaced with a single word.

"Harry?"

"Harry?"

Emotions. How I detest them.

"Harry? I-Is that you?" the woman whispers again.

I turn to see identical green eyes peering at me. The long strands of red hair. She looks older now. Worn.

Memories surface. Threatening to cloud my mind.

No. Not again. Never again.

My glammers hold. My face twists upwards into a confused smile. I steady my voice.

"I am sorry, ma'am," if I had not so much practice, I am sure my tone would have wavered, "But I believe you are looking for someone else."

"No... No... You look like him," the woman's grasp on my sleeve is like steel, "So like him."

"Ma'am," it is so hard to keep this smile, so damn hard, "I must protest. You are looking for someone else."

She does not let go, and I see her eyes hold unshed tears.

"Lily!" another voice from the past, another memory clawing at my sanity, "Lily! What's wrong!"

My hand shakes. Hidden in its sleeve. Itching for the wand holstered by my side.

The man has rushed over to the woman's side and is peering from her to me with a bewildered expression on his weathered face.

"What's wrong Lily!"

"James! He looks just like him! Just like our Harry!"

The man turns to me, and his eyes widen behind his glasses.

"H-Harry?" he whispers.

My teeth clench. I sense Hate. Wanting to be called. Begging to be called.

"I am not Harry," it is hard not to snarl, but I accomplish it anyways, "My name is Bayard. A student of Beauxbatons."

Reality seems to crash on the man. He holds his wife away, who now truly is crying.

"Come on Lils. It can't be Harry. The kid has blonde hair. He might look like him, but it's not our Harry."

I nearly burst out laughing at this rich irony.

"I know it's him, James! I just know it's him!" the woman is saying, but her shoulders are slumped, defeated.

"It's alright Lily, it's alright," the man says softly to the woman, comforting her. He then turns to me with a remorseful look, "I'm very sorry... Bayard was it?" I nod and he continues, "It's just that you look like our lost son, and my wife thought he had come back."

I school my expression into one of concern.

"You must have loved him very much," my sarcasm is like acid, but it goes unnoticed, just as I expected it would.

"We did," the man smiles sadly, "But we realized it too late."

They turn and leave. I gaze at their backs.

"For Heaven's sake Ron," Hermione sighed in exasperation, "You stare at that girl like she was an angel straight from heaven."

"Huh, wozzat?" was Ron's less than intelligent reply.

Adam grinned, amused at his two friend's antics. The Boy-Who-Lived looked around, and noticed much of the Gryffindor table, the boys at least, displayed similar attributes to Ron. Dean Thomas was staring open mouthed at the beautiful French witch, his fork still halfway to his mouth. Seamus Finnigan's eyes were nearly popping out of his skull. Even the Weasley twins were gazing at the girl with awe.

"Oh I give up!" Hermione threw up her hands in defeat.

"Don't be too hard on Ron," Ginny said from beside his brother, "The whole table's gawking."

"Well Adam isn't," Hermione pointed out, causing the Gryffindor to chuckle.

"I don't think I'm affected. Not nearly as much as Ron anyways."

"Good for you Adam," Ginny smiled but Adam's attention was no longer on the conversation.

"Mum?"

Lily was being escorted by James, and the auror had her in a comforting embrace, while muttering into her ear.

Hermione frowned, concerned.

"Is Professor Potter crying?"

"Adam?" Ginny poked the boy in the ribs, seeking an answer.

"I dunno," Adam replied lamely, "She usually only gets this way when the term starts. I don't have a clue why she's depressed now, especially with dad here."

"Do you think it has to do with Harry?"

The Boy-Who-Lived shrugged helplessly, and watched as his parents settled at the staff table, Lily hiding her face in James's chest.

A sudden storm of whispers brought Adam back to reality, and the Gryffindor turned to see a boy in a Beauxbatons uniform walking towards the Ravenclaw table.

"Oh for Heaven's sake," Hermione exclaimed, her gaze now on the female population of the Gryffindor table, "Not again."

Adam took a quick look around and noticed with no small amount of trepidation that most girls were staring at the newcomer with an almost maniacal gleam in their eyes. The Boy-Who-Lived snorted into his cup when he saw Lavender Brown displaying the same expression as Ron as the Beauxbatons boy strode past.

"First the boys, and now the girls!" Hermione said in exasperation, "I don't know what the big deal is. He's just a normal boy!"

Adam was forced to disagree. The boy in question was not the most handsome, and if Adam was being vain, he would consider himself better looking. No, it was not in the looks department that seemed to make the female population of Hogwarts suddenly develop blushes on their cheeks. It was the way the boy carried himself. Confident. Powerful. Dominating. The boy didn't simply walk. He stalked. Like a predator. Alluring and intimidating in a single form.

"Sweet Merlin," blurted out Katie Bell from three seats down, "You think there are male Veela?"

This, of course, caused a gale of excited whispers and giggling to overtake the Gryffindor table.

Hermione just rolled her eyes.

"Adam! Look!" Ginny was pulling on his sleeve and pointing a slender finger in the direction of the Slytherin table.

Adam did look, and couldn't help but let out a loud guffaw. Malfoy's face had held a superior sneer ever since Viktor Krum had joined the Slytherins. Now, it was white in fury as Pansy Parkinson stopped fawning over him and proceeded to gape at the newcomer.

Adam grinned. He would have to shake the boy's hand just for making Malfoy look like that.

"What kept you?" Fleur snapped in French. She was annoyed. Very much so. The entire Ravenclaw table, the boys at least, were staring at her in wide-eyed wonder.

Bayard slid smoothly in the seat she saved him, and smiled back before replying back in English.

"Complications. Apparently I have a passing resemblance to that woman's long lost son," the boy nodded his head in the direction of a red-haired witch seated at the staff table. Fleur just glared at him, as though blaming him for the attention she was getting.

"Professor Potter?" a pretty witch with curly brown hair asked, "She's our Muggle Studies professor. She's really good, but sometimes she gets depressed."

"There's a story to it you know," an Asian girl that sat across from Fleur added, "Has to do with the Boy-Who-Lived's twin."

"A fascinating story, I'm sure," Bayard wagged his eyebrows, "But before this story continues, I must ask for the pleasure of knowing your names."

Both witches smiled. Fleur frowned. Claire, sitting by her, hid her smile in her hand.

"I'm Cho Chang," the Asian witch nodded, "And this is my friend, Marietta Edgecombe."

"Delighted," Bayard inclined his head respectfully, before giving both girls his undivided attention, "And now, the story?"

"Well, you know how You-Know-Who attacked the Potters, right?" Marietta began, "and how Adam Potter rebounded the Killing Curse? Well Adam had a twin, and he survived that night as well. From what I hear, after the whole thing died down, the Potters began strutting around Diagon Alley liked they owned the place. Of course, it was only with the Boy-Who-Lived in tow. They were never seen with their other son."

"Pride is a sinful thing," the boy interjected, shooting a glance back at the staff table, "What happened next?"

"Apparently they neglected Adam's twin," Cho said in place for her friend, "The twin ran away from home and the Daily Prophet dedicated an entire month of subscriptions on how the Potters mistreated their other son."

"Yeah. It was a shock," spoke another girl to Cho's left, who seemed to blush as Bayard's attention switched to her, "I mean, my parents thought the Potters were heroes, and then they do something so terrible. A lot of other families felt the same way."

"And what happened to the twin?" the boy asked, concern etched across his features.

"We don't know," Marietta shrugged, her curly locks bouncing, "There was a big search all over England. The Prophet was reporting on it daily, but they never did find him."

"That's what they want you to believe," the same girl as before said mysteriously, "There are other theories to what happened to the Potter twin."

Bayard rose an inquisitive brow.

"And they are?"

The girl blushed again, a deeper shade of crimson, as the boy smiled charmingly at her before stuttering a reply. Fleur's scowl went by unnoticed.

"Well, my parents think that maybe he was taken by dark wizards, and trained to be the next Dark Lord."

"Yes, well," Marietta sniffed, "We all know what your parents are like, Mandy. They're only slightly less barmy than Looney's."

"Hey!"

"Mari!" Cho nudged her friend who huffed in response, "I'm sorry Mandy. You know how she is," turning the Asian witch shot an apologetic look to a blonde girl who had been staring off into space, "Sorry, Luna. Mari shouldn't have said that."



"It's quite all right," the blonde smiled with a dreamy look in her eyes, "She's infected with Wracksburts. They make her say the strangest things."

"See what I mean?" Marietta growled, "Barmy."

"What is the British Ministry's position on the twin's disappearance?" Bayard asked, and Fleur noticed with interest that the boy seemed to be pressing the conversation.

Marietta's face brightened visibly at the question.

"The official position is that he's dead," the witch said somberly, her words carrying an authoritative air, "He disappeared when he was eight, and the consensus is that no one could have survived for that long at such a young age. It's a bit sad, really. I would have liked to meet him."

Bayard smiled winningly at Marietta, and Fleur scowled again, not knowing why.

"Maybe you've already met him," the boy winked, "Maybe he's hidden himself from view all this time. Maybe he's disguised as just another student," Bayard leaned forward, and caused Marietta to blush at the closeness, "Maybe he's me."

The surrounding witches, the wizards's focus still undividedly on Fleur, sat silent for a minute, before breaking into laughter.

"That was a good joke, Mister..."

"Bayard, Miss Edgecombe. Just Bayard."

"You have an unusual sense of humor, Bayard," Cho smiled.

"An ordinary gift," green eyes were alight with warmth, "used to charm extraordinary witches."

Fleur's scowl deepened. Claire rolled her eyes and jabbed her elbow in her friend's side. Fleur grimaced, but soon replaced it with a charming smile of her own.

"Zis place iz very different from France," her voice was a melodious song that seemed to even affect Bayard. The boy gave her an appraising glance, and Fleur found herself wishing it lasted longer, "I like its atmosphere."

"Hogwarts is the best place in Europe to get a magical education," a Ravenclaw boy, an older student, boasted to her, before offering her his hand, "Roger Davies by the way. A pleasure to meet you."

Fleur sent him a jolt of her allure in response. The boy's eyes became blank and his face creased into a foolish grin.

"Nice to meet you, Roger," Fleur took the hand, and willed the boy away. The Ravenclaw immediately focused on his own plate, the foolish grin still in place. The girl next to Roger glowered at her, which Fleur matched with a stony gaze.

Claire sent Fleur a knowing look. So did Bayard, which surprised her. Her bodyguard winked before launching himself back into the conversation, steering the Ravenclaws's attention away from the quarter-Veela. It was an oddly compassionate gesture.

Claire gave her another look, one that seemed to say "told you so". Fleur ignored it.

Time would tell.

Albus Dumbledore narrowed his eyes as he watched the blonde-haired, green-eyed boy sitting at the Ravenclaw table. He was a handsome enough lad, with a boisterous, lively air. The Ravenclaw girls had noticed too, and those not conversing with him were talking and giggling to each other while shooting the boy shy glances. But that was not interested Albus Dumbledore.

The Headmaster watched with a mixture of fascination and horror as a tendril of dark substance lifted from the boy's body, drifting lazily. The tendril was quickly joined by another, and then another. Dumbledore frowned. His wizarding sight allowed him to see the magical cores of all his students, as well as their auras. It was a gift, and an extremely rare one. Few knew about it, and Albus preferred it that way. Normally, a magical being's core was a shining, lustrous orb, filled with hidden potential. But the boy's. Dumbledore couldn't see it. Not completely. The dark substance covered it like a cloak,

but Albus could catch glimpses of raw, pulsating power that ached to be released.

And the dark substance itself. Like shadows, ghosting through the air, rippling and swaying in a protective shield around the boy. It was not dark magic. Albus was sure of it. There was no hidden residue that the Killing Curse or the Cruciatus Curse would have left. It almost felt like an emotion. Feeling. Detached from the boy and guarding him from harm.

The Headmaster blinked, and noticed that Marietta Edgecombe was blushing under the boy's charming gaze.

Again Dumbledore scrutinized the boy. Blonde hair an unruly tangle, giving him a roguish, attractive appearance. Green eyes alight with laughter. A faint, pinkish scar, almost hidden, embedded across the forehead.

Wait.

Messy hair. Green eyes. Scar on the forehead. At once Dumbledore was assailed with the image of a skinny boy with a sad, knowing smile.

Sweet Merlin could it be?

Inwardly, Dumbledore drew up a picture of what Harry would have looked like if he was still alive. Then he compared it to the boy who was making half the Ravenclaw table laugh at his antics. The hair was a different shade of color. This boy's cheeks were a tad too high. But those features can be changed with a well conjured Glamour Charm. Everything else...

Albus shot a look across the staff table, towards where Lily Potter was listlessly quartering the contents of her dinner plate and rearranging them into smaller and smaller portions. The Muggles Studies professor was staring at the boy as well, though there was no spark of recognition in her eyes. She thought the boy resembled Harry, looked like him so much, but wasn't him at the same time. It was the very definition of ironic, the Headmaster thought.

The urge was there. To stand bolt upright and announce to the world that Harry James Potter was alive and well. That the boy who sat

laughing and joking with the Ravenclaw table had come to Hogwarts at last.

Dumbledore repressed it. He knew that the glamours were there for a reason. If Harry ever decided to forgive them, then he would do it on his own time. Albus doubted such an occasion was now. The aged Headmaster watched as Harry said something to the Beauxbatons witch beside him, who smiled back alluringly in response, but seemed to give death glares to the surrounding Ravenclaw girls.

My, my Harry. The headmaster's eyes twinkled. A Veela? Your father will be proud.

It is night. The Beauxbatons carriage has at last grown quiet.

I pace outside, and wait for the lights to dim.

A minute after, and nothing remains but the moonlight from a clear, dark sky.

And then the shadows move, twisting, convulsing, flowing with a life of their own. They coalesce, becoming solid, joining together to become a man-sized figure. The head emerges, horns sprouting from a cross-visored helm. Emerald balls of fire peer at its surroundings, and then rest of the body comes, forming pauldrons, a breastplate, gauntlets, and more.

Hate stares at me, and it is with amusement in his metallic voice that he next speaks.

"So that was your mother."

I glance coldly back at him, and Hate chuckles.

"She has not aged well. Neither has your father."

"I suppose not," I reply, "My brother's needs must be wearing them down."

"Perhaps. But I think it is something else."

The black-clad knight articulates the joints in his gloves, shattering the silence with steel-ringed cracks.

"They look guilty," Hate turns to look at me again, "I can see it in their eyes."

"Guilt rightfully earned," the statement comes at a low snarl, and I am surprised at the vehemence in my tone.

"The hate is flaring within you," the hulking figure observes, "Their presence has affected you."

"You lie," I state simply.

"Do I?" Hate strides slowly towards the lake, the moonlight creating a shimmering mirror of still water, "Never forget that it was you who forged me from your emotions all those years ago. I can feel your anger, your hate, your sorrow. Swelling deep within your soul. They are most beautiful."

"You lie," I say again as I follow him.

The knight stares down at me, with something akin to sympathy.

"It is normal to feel such emotions," he rasps, "After all. They are still your family."

"I have felt nothing for a long time, Hate. I won't start feeling now."

He inclines his head, bowing out of the argument.

"On to more pleasant things then, my lord?" his sword comes loose from its sheathe, a gleaming, polished thing of blackened steel.

My lips part into a smirk and the wand I clasp in my hand transforms, flowing like molten silver, strengthening and lengthening into a blade.

"What is the record?"

"Five minutes and twenty-six seconds," Hate declares.

"Five minutes and twenty-seven seconds, then. Today."

I sense him smile behind his helm.

"I would like to see you try."

## Chapter 5: Impressions

Inase Takahashi slowly moved the cloth down the blade of her katana, cleaning the weapon with methodical slowness. The act of cleansing the weapon was like cleansing one's soul, a deliberate, careful process that had been passed down from generation and generation of the Tempest Moon clan. Her father had purified his weapon in the hidden spring of her village before marching to war and her grandfather before that had dedicated a day and night to the sanctity of the sword. Some would call this fanaticism. Inase called it respect.

The black-haired witch blinked as movement came behind her. Her hand instinctively clutched the hilt, but relaxed as it turned out to be just another drunken henchman the Russian had hired. The man gave a loud belch, smelling of firewhisky, before collapsing to the ground in a drunken stupor.

Inase sneered.

These men were a rabble. A despicable, filthy lot whose sole motivation was greed. They were dishonorable, and as the code of the samurai dictated, dishonor was to be cleansed by the sword. Inase had felt a physical need to stab one when he had commented crudely on her beauty. The need had intensified as she met the rest of the Russian's wretched coven.

Inase wondered what her clan would think if they learned the noble daughter of Iziko Takahashi was consorting with thugs and villains.

The thought was a sobering one, but it did not despair her. The assignment had been taken. The contract negotiated. Honor now demanded that she fulfill her duty to her employer, and if that meant working with uncouth scum, then she would swallow her revulsion. This was her first foray outside of her mountain village, and she wanted desperately to make her impression on the mercenary world, even if that meant grouping with the Russian.

Her face turned dark as footsteps signaled the approach of the source of her thoughts.

A grunt came from behind her, and Inase turned from her blade to see Sergei Vehnikov glaring at her.

"You vill rest," his voice was as thick as his body, and the man's beady eyes travelled up and down the witch's slender frame with barely concealed lust, "Tomorrow vill bring vork. Frenchman vill come and ve vill grab the girl."

"I will do whatever I please," Inase's disgust was like a whip, lashing at the Russian with worded blows, "You can go back to that den you call a camp and pass out with the rest of your ilk."

"You are strong," Sergei smiled, though it looked more like a scowl, "I like my vomen strong."

"Don't even think about it," the woman sneered, and displayed her gleaming blade.

The Russian growled out something incoherent, and backed away a few steps. Then, he sneered back, his voice a repulsive snarl.

"I came to varn you. Tomorrow ve get the girl. She is pretty. Contract says to bring her damaged if possible. Ve vill damage her."

Inase's eyes widened at the mercenary's statement. She had expected to kill, to slay in this profession. But what the Russian implied... It caused her skin to crawl. The witch's conscience fought a fierce inner war in the recesses of her mind. On one side, honor demanded the contract to be upheld no matter the costs. On the other, morality fought back, begging her to leave with her decency left intact.

"You... All of you... are monsters," Inase hissed, "To do that to a girl... Even if she is our target..."

Sergei laughed, harsh and barking, like an animal. Inase found herself hating him even more.

"You signed the contract-" the Russian began.

"I signed the contract with the expectation that nothing dishonorable will occur!" Inase snapped, her porcelain-white face a mask of anger, "What you and your thugs are going to do is a crime against human nature!"



"Contract is explicit," Sergei shot back, and crossed his thick arms over his burly chest, "Ve take the girl. But Frenchmen vant her damaged for her father to see. Vant her father to fear. Ve damage her to make her compliant."

"Compliant!" the witch spat, incredulous, "Foul, degenerate dogs!"

"Foul, degenerate dogs you are vorking with," the Russian leered, "You go against contract? You lose your magic."

"There was no such clause when I signed!"

"Frenchman vas tricky," Sergei's grin sent a disgusted shiver down Inase's spine, "He add to the contract after you signed and left."

"They can't do that!" Inase's face had turned horror-stricken, "You can't change magical contracts after you signed them!"

The Russian's grin grew wider.

"You are new to dis. Ministries do not check magical contracts between mercenaries and clients. Ve do not belong to their country, so ve are exempt from their laws. They do not care."

"But it is not honorable to-"

This time it was the Russian who interrupted her.

"Honorable? You expect honor in dis line of vork? We go to kidnap girl from her school and leave her at the hands of her family's vorst enemies and you think of honor?" Sergei looked amused, "You are new to dis. I tell you now, first thing a mercenary loses is honor. Ve do anything for gold. Kill. Burn. Rape," the Russian shrugged noncommittally, "I used to care ven I was new. But dat vas many years ago. Now girl is just another girl. Ve break her for the contract, den ve send her to the Frenchmen. It is simple."

Inase was speechless. Sergei regarded her for a few more seconds before turning on his heel.

"Ve break her here tomorrow," the bounty hunter said over his shoulder, "If you do not vant to hear her screams, cast a Silencing Charm on your ears. It vill help."

The witch stared at the back of the retreating Russian, her thoughts a turmoil mess. She turned to see Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry looming in the distance, and prayed to her ancestors what she was about to help do would not damn her soul.

Fleur Delacour had been in Hogwarts for only two days, and already she yearned for home. It was not the climate or the atmosphere. No, a little cold would not stop the daughter of Sebastian Delacour. It wasn't the paltry selection of food either. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner consisted of the same basic ingredients. Meat. Vegetables. Fruit. Pumpkin Juice. The English seemed to have little imagination with their meals. But all that was tolerable. What was not were the stares.

The quarter-Veela scowled as a Hogwarts sixth year walked head-long into a wall, all the while staring at her. The boy gave a goofy grin as he realized she was looking at him and Fleur hurriedly turned her attention elsewhere, lest the sixth year think she had some ulterior motive. Nearly every boy she had encountered so far in her rush to get to classes had turned slack-jawed in her presence. It was ridiculous.

Claire strode confidently by her friend's side with a bemused Aimeric tagging along slightly behind.

"You should not blame them Fleur," Claire spoke up as they navigated past the fallen sixth year, "They are not used to your allure."

Fleur's response was a string of dark mutterings about Englishmen, pigs, and a gutter. Aimeric coughed to hide his laughter.

"Come now, Fleur," the pureblood said after he recovered, "Many boys gave you the same looks when you first attended Beauxbatons."

"Yes, but unlike the students at Hogwarts, they had a semblance of self-control," Fleur spat as the trio rounded a corner.

"Still angry over this morning?" Claire asked sympathetically.

This morning. Angry was not a word to describe it. As she had sat down in the Great Hall to eat, a blonde-haired boy leading two students with a resemblance to trolls had slinked over from the Slytherin table and had without invitation, sat across from her. The boy, whose name Fleur did not and did not want to remember, had spent a good fifteen minutes rambling about his family's high standings in British magical society, a topic that the quarter-Veela couldn't give two knuts about. The urge to stand up and sit somewhere else had been particularly strong, and it was only through Fleur's sense of politeness that she did not do so. At the end, the boy had swept Fleur's unwilling hand to his lips and kissed it.

Fleur ground her teeth at the memory.

Claire noticed and couldn't help but pour salt into the injury.

"I do believe the best part was at the end."

Aimeric chuckled, and adopted the superior smirk the boy had worn throughout the conversation.

"I believe, Miss Delacour, we will be having quite a few meetings in the future, most likely at my family manor," the pureblood mimicked, much to Claire's delight and Fleur's fury.

"You should have sent him away with your allure," Claire nudged her.

"I tried," Fleur grounded out, "And he was affected. But he stayed there and kept on talking."

Aimeric raised an elegant eyebrow.

"I do believe that we have found someone more conceited than Montague."

"Bayard should have knocked him flying," Claire declared.

"He arrived too late," Aimeric nodded sadly.

"Where is Bayard anyways? He sat down to eat and then was gone."

"He left with Marietta," Fleur snarled.

Aimeric blinked in surprise at the venom in her tone, while Claire just smiled.

"And did this... Marietta... do something to insult you?" the pureblood asked hesitantly.

"Yes, she did," Claire answered for her, "She took Bayard away."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Aimeric's face had turned confused.

Claire was about to reply when Fleur cut her off.

"Nothing, Aimeric. Don't listen to Claire's gossip," the quarter-Veela struggled with her anger. Her bodyguard had said a hurried goodbye before the Hogwarts witch ensnared his arm and lead him out of the Great Hall. The jealousy had returned then, stronger than before, and that bothered Fleur.

Bayard was an anomaly. An inconsistency in her life that she could not figure out. He was charming, smart, and good-looking, and Fleur had no doubt in her mind he would grow up to be a fine man. But he was also a bodyguard, a boy her father hired to ensure her safety. Their relationship was and could only be strictly professional. Any compassion he showed her was because he was paid to do so, and that rankled badly with the quarter-Veela. If she one day did began to like him, or even love him, she would never be sure if the emotions he returned were real. Not as her bodyguard at least.

And then there was his age. Claire had been right. Age should not matter, but Fleur could not help but think differently. Bayard was mature, more so than some men she had encountered, but he was still only fourteen, while she had already entered the first steps of womanhood. Women didn't like boys. It was wrong, and no matter how Fleur tried, she could only see Bayard as that. A boy. Not a man.

Still. She felt like she was missing something. Like a lost opportunity. And it was driving her crazy.

I stare into the face of someone I hate, and the only thing I can do is smile.

The boy smiles back, handsome, rugged, the picture perfect of his parents. Our parents. He wears James's face, softened by Lily's features. Years ago, I would have torn at him with my fingers. Now, I speak to him as though he were a friend.

"Hello," I greet, and clasp his hand with my own, "You must be Adam Potter."

"Yeah, I am," his voice has not changed. I can still feel the innate superiority in it, though it has been lessened by age, "Just wanted to say hi to the only foreign student in our year."

My eyes flicker to the witch and wizard that stands with him. The witch possesses an inquisitive countenance and clutches a textbook close to her chest. The wizard is lanky and tall, but his features are that of a boy, with an almost obnoxious shade of red hair.

"Charmed," I force myself to say.

"You don't have an accent!" the witch says excitedly, as though I am some foreign specimen to be examined, "How can that be? The other Beauxbatons students have accents!"

"I have been to many countries," a half-lie, "Miss...?"

"Granger. Hermione Granger," the witch nods happily, "So you must be a transfer student to the academy then?"

"Yes," another half-lie, "You are most observant, Miss Granger."

I have the suspicion she would have asked for more, but the lanky wizard interrupts her.

"You made Malfoy look like a loon yesterday," he grins, "That makes you and me friends already. I'm Ron Weasley by the way."

"Malfoy?"

"Yeah," Ron grimaces as though smelling something foul, "that Slytherin ponce."

Adam chuckles. The sound grates on my nerves.

"Ron! Adam!" Hermione admonishes her friend, though it is lackluster. She turns to me, "Sorry about these two. They have an almost fanatical hatred for Draco. He's a Slytherin, you know. Pureblood too. And I don't mean to sound rude, but he can be most infuriating at times."

"I understand," this time, the truth, "There are some magical folk who insists on the old ways, even though time has moved forward."

All three nod at my words, before Hermione speaks again.

"I'm sure that France doesn't have nearly as much bigotry from their purebloods."

"There are some," I reply, "But they are in positions of power and won't make their beliefs known to the public."

"Same here," Ron scoffed, "Malfoy gets away with it because his dad's a Board Governor of Hogwarts. He also has half the Wizengamot in his pocket."

"At least the auror department hasn't been affected," Adam looks proud, "My dad and Uncle Sirius won't have anything to do with pureblooded supremacy."

Sirius. Sirius Black. Another memory. This one not so bad, but useless like all the others.

Pause.

Blink.

Pause.

"Is he okay?" Hermione whispers in a worried voice.

"He's just standing there, staring at us," Ron mutters.

I shake my head and bring myself out of the reverie.

"I apologize," the smile that comes is natural, but the emotion behind it is utterly fake, "Sometimes I space out. It comes and goes."

"It's alright mate," Adam says with a grin, before frowning, "Just watch out for Snape. He's this class's instructor. He doesn't like it when you space out while he's teaching."

"Is he like Malfoy?" my question causes both boys to roll their eyes.

"Worse," they say together.

"He's not that bad," Hermione says, though her tone lacks conviction.

"Not that bad?" Ron exclaims, "Hermione, the git takes off points from Gryffindor just because Adam is breathing."

I have a sneaking suspicion I might like this professor.

"Maybe Adam should stop. Breathing that is," the trio smile at my joke. They don't know it is no joke.

The rest of the class is arriving, and the three turn their attention to their friends. Those dressed in red and gold come in chattering groups. Those clad in green and silver slink into the dungeon in ones and twos. All of them regard me with curiosity, and I admit that the light blue drab that is my uniform sets me apart in the dank atmosphere.

The professor is last to come in, sweeping into the dungeon with his robes billowing out from behind him.

"Another year," Snape's voice carries the same sneer that's plastered on his face, "Two more terms I have to suffer with you insufferable lot," he glares at one side of the room, populated by Gryffindors, and I notice with amusement that Adam sinks low into his seat to avoid the man's gaze. The Slytherins all grin at their rivals' discomfort, and more than a few make jeering faces.

"Ahhh. What do we have here?" the man then turns to me. The sneer has lessened, though it has not dropped, "A Beauxbatons student? Yes, yes. I do recall you are the only fourth year in the French contingent."

"Yes, sir," I reply, for the lack of anything else to say.

"See? That is called respect, ladies and gentlemen," even when smiling, Snape's sneer does not disappear. He glares again at the Gryffindor side of the dungeon, "A trait some of you would do well to learn."

The Slytherins snicker.

"Your name?" the man has stalked closer to me now, and as he nears, I see his hair clinging to his skull as though it was greased.

"Bayard, sir. Just Bayard."

"Well, Mister Bayard," Snape halts in front of my desk, and peers down at me, "I admit that I am unaware of the Potions regimen offered at Beauxbatons. Perhaps a little test is in order? To see where you stand?"

I make myself look nervous.

"If you think it is necessary, sir."

"Oh I think it is very necessary," an almost predatory gleam has appeared in his eyes, and I almost sympathize with the Gryffindors for having weathered this man's teaching. Almost.

"Quick, Mister Bayard," the class jumps a little, "Tell me what possible effect a pint of dragon blood can have on your cauldron if it is poured in too late."

From the corner of my eye, I see Hermione's hand shoot up. I ignore it and drag the relevant information from the depths of my mind.

"It can cause an explosion sir," Hermione lowers her hand with a disappointed look, "Dragon blood is highly volatile. Unbelievably so. If the right amount is added in at the right interval, then it can greatly enhance the effects of the potion. Otherwise, you may have to pick yourself back together from the dungeon floor."

A faint wave of laughter. Snape's lips twitch. I can't tell if he's angry or pleased.



"An adequate answer, Mister Bayard," the man paces by me, hands clasped behind his back, "And what would your impressions be if a brewer tries to offer you a potion laced with strips of crocodile heart, pufferfish eyes, and substantial amounts of aconite?"

Hermione's hand once again shoots for the sky. If Snape gives any indication he noticed, he certainly doesn't show it.

"If the brewer is a woman, sir, I would feel flattered that she thinks I am worthy to be doused with an Infatuation Potion. If the brewer is a man, then I believe running for my life is the best option."

Another wave of laughter. I see Adam giving me a thumb's up, and Ron smiling brightly at me. They look so normal. So ordinary. Living the life I was denied. I feel Hate. Begging. Pleading. I ignore him and turn my attention back to the professor.

"Adequate, again, Mister Bayard. Perhaps Beauxbatons has a tolerable Potions curriculum after all. Are you ready for the last question?"

"I am, sir."

"Kingsblood, Mister Bayard. A common ingredient in potions laboratories everywhere. But also a dangerous element if used in some... rarer... potions. Can you name three and describe them to me?"

This time, Hermione doesn't raise her hand. She does not know the answer, and the look of horror on her face at this revelation is most entertaining.

"Blood-Serum, sir. Used to clear the veins and arteries of the human body of a particularly nasty strain of poison. An inappropriate amount can cause nearly as much damage as the poison it is supposed to cure."

Snape smiles. A sneer and a smirk mixed in one.

"Correct."

"Troll's Breath is another sir. When drunk, it imbues the drinker with the ability to spit highly toxic saliva. Its use is currently banned in thirty-six countries."

"Correct again, Mister Bayard."

"The final one would be the Bombarding Elixir, sir. It consists of heavy doses of ground Kingsblood along with many other volatile ingredients. Its use was first documented by the Ottoman Empire when they hurled it in vast amounts against the magically warded walls of Constantinople to devastating effect."

"Very good, Mister Bayard," Snape drawls, "Fifteen points to Slytherin for answering all three questions and a further five for answering them correctly."

The green and silver dressed side flash me grins of approval. The red and gold side looks at me in horror.

"But he's not even in Slytherin!" Ron cries out in outrage.

"Five points from Gryffindor for your cheek Mister Weasley," Snape sneers, "And for your information, he's not in Gryffindor either."

Ron sputters in anger and would surely have said something he would later regret if Hermione hadn't pulled him down. Snape glares at the Gryffindor side to ensure they are properly cowed, before turning to me with a faintly pleased expression.

"You are quite skilled at Potions, Mister Bayard."

"Only in theory sir," I school my expression into one of modesty, "Knowledge is easy to obtain. Practice, not so much."

"Well said," the man stares at me in mild approval, "Perhaps you would like to sit with the students who can actually brew?" Snape gestures to the Slytherin side, "instead of clumsy oafs who can't tell the difference between a cauldron and their right foot," the Gryffindors all look incensed, but the glare the professor shoots them is enough to keep them silent.

I shrug.

"Wherever you want me, sir."

"Very good," Snape sneers before turning, "Miss Davis," a pretty witch with bright blue eyes looks up in surprise, "I see that Miss Greengrass is absent from my class."

"Yes, sir," the girl replies demurely, "Daphne is still on her vacation. She comes back tonight."

"Then Mister Bayard will be your temporary partner for today. Get to it."

"Understood sir," I nod, and walk towards the girl and the empty seat at her table.

"That slimey, no good, toad-kissing git!"

"Ron!"

"No Hermione! Don't stop me! That bastard took off fifty points! For one bloody class!"

Adam grimaced as he listened to his best friend's rant. The Boy-Who-Lived had thought he had weathered through the worst Snape could possibly throw at him. Today proved that wrong. The greasy professor had taken off another five points from Gryffindor when he had asked a question. Then ten more when Ron protested. Another five went away when Neville accidentally chopped his Lacewing Flies into quarters instead of thirds, followed by five more when Dean Thomas knocked over a vial of ground caterpillars. The last ten was taken when Adam had gotten up to leave. Something about "knowing your manners in front of a professor", which Adam was pretty sure was Snape-talk for "I hate you and everything about you".

"And that's not even the worst part!" Ron continued, outraged, "The git gave the snakes sixty points! For doing nothing! He gave Malfoy five for looking 'attentive'!"

It was true. Crabbe and Goyle had received points for the same reason. Blaise Zabini had earned ten for "arranging his vials precisely", and Theodore Nott was given five for "pouring in crocodile blood with flair". Adam felt frustration well up from within

him. If this continued, Gryffindor would be in negatives before the first term ended.

"And don't get me started on that Bayard kid," Ron snarled, "He earned another twenty points for Slytherin alone! And he was with Davis! Davis isn't even good at Potions! But somehow they turn up a perfect mixture together! Stupid, bloody git!"

"Ronald!" Hermione exclaimed, "You can't say that about him! He didn't have a choice!"

"Sure he did! He could have sat with any one of us! But instead he sat with the snakes!"

"That's not being fair to him Ron," Adam chided gently, "Snape made him go sit with Davis. I don't think he would have otherwise. Besides, he seems like an alright kid."

"But he earned Slytherin points!"

"You wouldn't be complaining if he was earning Gryffindor points," Hermione pointed out.

"Of course not! Gryffindor deserves the points!" Ron retorted.

Both Adam and Hermione rolled their eyes. Best friend, Ron may be, but towards a subject he was passionate about, and he was downright stubborn.

"I wonder where Bayard learned about the Kingsblood potions," Hermione mused, "Blood-Serum sounds kind of tame, but Troll's Breath and the Bombarding Elixir? Those sound like they would hurt."

"Probably got it from some dark wizards," Ron growled out, "Taught him how to brew the slimy stuff."

"He does seem knowledgeable," Adam admitted, while ignoring Ron's darker and darker mutterings, "Maybe he learned as he travelled? Didn't he say he was a transfer student?"

"Maybe he can teach us some of the things he learned," Hermione's eyes were gleaming at the thought.

"I'm not going to learn anything from a snake!" Ron staunchly vowed.

"He's not a Slytherin, Ron!" Hermione looked back at the scowling redhead in agitation, "Don't forget he's from Beauxbatons. You know? The same school that witch you were ogling at yesterday goes to?"

At once, Ron's face turned red, and Adam laughed at his friend's embarrassed expression.

"Maybe the French school has their own version of Slytherin," Ron said sulkily, before following his friends down towards the Great Hall.

"Luna? Is it?"

Emerald eyes regards her with sympathy. She knows it is false. The Ravenclaw allows herself to be helped up. The boy bends down to pick up her books, spilled from her bag by her own housemates. She just stands there, gazing up into the churning shadows that swirled around the boy.

"Hello," Luna said dreamily, "Are you a Wrackspurt?"

The shadows seemed surprised. They whipped about the boy in a frenzy, excited, and forced those emerald eyes to regard her again.

You can see me?

The voice that entered her mind was like metal, a thick, grating sound that caused her to flinch mentally.

"I can," Luna replied happily, "You don't look like much though."

The shadows seemed to shrug. How it did without shoulders, Luna didn't know.

My form is decided by my lord. I am his shield. His blade. What he needs, I will become.

Luna nodded gravely at that. She turned to the boy, who had been regarding her with curiosity all this time. She took the books and

slipped them back into her bag, and then faced him again, a serious expression on her delicate features. Without warning, she curtsied.

"Lord Wrackspurt," Luna inclined her head to the boy in acknowledgment.

The boy snorted. Not in derision, as much of her classmates would do, but in amusement. And then he stared at her. Luna admitted that any other girl would find his attention welcome. After all, he was a very handsome boy.

"Very few can see Hate," the boy's eyes bored into her, cold and calculating, though his face was still pleasant, "In fact, you are the first one besides me."

"Hate is a strange name for a Wrackspurt," Luna began, "I didn't think they had names, but it's something I've considered. Not like Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, of course. Snorkacks all have names. They're very smart creatures."

The voice in her head laughed, harsh and booming.

I like this one, my lord. Can we keep her?

"And what possible use can she be to us?" Luna cocked her head at the boy's question.

"I can help you keep the Nargles away," she suggested.

Exactly. She can help keep the Nargles away.

"And what exactly is a Nargle?" the boy asked.

Luna drew back in horror. The boy didn't know!"

"Nargles are devious little things," Luna lectured, "They steal things from you when you're not looking. I had my shoes taken away from them many times," at this, the boy's eyes flashed, though Luna didn't know why, "and sometimes my homework too. This year I made sure to wear extra protection against Nargles, and so far, nothing has been stolen. I'm pretty sure that they'll steal something from me later though. Nargles always do."

"And these Nargles," the boy peered at her, "Do they resemble humans? Maybe certain people you know? Housemates perhaps?"

Luna shrugged.

"I've never given it any thought," she admitted, "They're just Nargles."

The boy stood back, and examined her. His features were still locked in a charming mask, but his eyes held an inner fire in them, as though his mind was locked in a furious struggle over something. Then, those emerald orbs cleared, and the boy stepped towards her, decision seemingly made.

"Luna," the smile was utterly fake, but she detected a faint trace of emotion lingering behind, "Would you like to sit with me for dinner?"

## Chapter 6: Blood and Fire

Morning brought much oddity to the Ravenclaw table. And much consternation to Fleur.

Luna, the girl whom Bayard had insisted sit next to him for dinner and now breakfast, had made a butterbeer cork necklace for the quarter-Veela. It was a simple, artless trinket, and Fleur thought it looked rather crude. But she couldn't refuse it, could she? That would seem rude and heartless of her. It didn't help that both Bayard and Luna were staring at her with serious expressions.

"It will help keep the Nargles away," Luna said dreamily as she held up her gift for all to behold. The nearest students, all from Hogwarts, snickered and Fleur glared at them angrily. The girl was eccentric, odd even, and Fleur had a feeling she had been ostracized by her classmates before.

"Zank you," she said, not knowing what else to say, and accepted the necklace with as much grace as she could muster. She placed it on the table and was about to continue her breakfast when she noticed that Bayard and Luna were still staring at her.

"What?"

"You're supposed to wear it," Luna spoke, her voice a singsong chirp, "It can't keep the Nargles away if you don't wear it."

Fleur didn't want to wear it.

"You should wear the necklace, Miss Delacour," Bayard smiled, and Luna nodded sagely by his side, "Nargles are quite hazardous to your health, from what Luna tells me."

Luna. Her bodyguard had used the girl's first name, when every other person he met he addressed by their title and last names. Even Fleur, he still called 'Miss Delacour'. And that grated on her nerves. That her bodyguard, hers, was on a first name basis with another girl and not her. Fleur thought the feeling was very childish, but couldn't deny it was still there.

"I don't zee you wearing one," she snapped at her protector.



The boy raised an eyebrow. He reached into his robes, and allowed Fleur a glimpse of his naked neck. There, butterbeer corks shined.

Fleur muttered underneath her breath, and Bayard smiled at her in return.

As though if sensing her predicament, the gates to the Great Hall suddenly blasted open, and Fleur, along with much of the student population, craned their necks to see the commotion. The two British auror captains, James and Sirius, if the quarter-Veela remembered correctly, were arguing heatedly with another figure, clad in silver battle robes. The uniform of the French Magical Law Department. At their heels were two more figures, one slim and dainty, the other broad-chested and lumbering, both wearing the same silver robes. The procession stopped at the Ravenclaw table, and Fleur realized with alarm that the reason for their argument was her.

"You do not have jurisdiction on English soil," James swept a hand through his hair agitatedly, and Sirius growled in agreement beside him.

"It iz not your jurisdiction that we need," the lead French auror replied, and turned to Fleur. He was a handsome, regal man with shining black eyes, "Miss Delacour. You must come with us. Somezing horrible haz happened."

"What?" the quarter-Veela rose, a sudden feeling of panic overtaking her, "What haz happened?"

"Your father," the auror said sadly, "There waz another attack on the manor. Your family waz zere zis time. The Ministry fears for your safaty, and has zent uz to retrieve you."

She heard the faint murmurings of sympathy around her, but paid them no heed.

"My father," she swallowed, "Iz he alright?"

"Yes, zankfully. But the rest of your family... Ze youngest..."

"Non," Fleur breathed, "Gabrielle..."

"You have to come with us at once, Miss Delacour."

Fleur nodded numbly, and rose from her seat. The auror raised a hand to take her arm.

"You know," Bayard's voice broke the silence, "If you wanted to kidnap her, you could have at least done better with the disguises."

All eyes turned to stare at the boy.

"Kidnap?" the auror looked confused, "You are miztaken."

"Yes, kidnap," Bayard twirled a fork in his fingers, a thin smile on his face, "You really didn't think no one would recognize this farce you call your plan, did you?"

"I would be affronted, zir, and would challenge your claims if time waz not a necessity. We are ze personnel of the ze French Ministry. Ze Magical Department of Law Enforcement."

"Yes, aurors," the boy nodded back, "And judging by your uniform, you are an auror captain"

"What does zat have to do with anyzing?"

"In England, auror captains command squads of twenty. In Fance, they command squads of fifteen. Why have you brought only three?"

The auror tensed. James and Sirius frowned, and then realization dawned upon their faces. Their wands were out in a flash, and pointed to the lead auror.

Fleur took a step back in fear. The auror's face had gone from businesslike to hateful, and before anyone could move a finger, the man lunged and grasped tight her arm.

Fleur felt the familiar tug of an activating portkey and gasped as the world swirled around her.

Sergei Vehnikov watched the Japanese woman disappear in a flash. The witch had activated her own portkey as soon as the Frenchman vanished with their target. Uptight bitch. The Russian fondled the chain attached to the pendant that was his own portkey, grinning at the stunned faces arrayed before him. The British aurors were well-

trained, disciplined even, but they were utterly unimaginative. It had taken some forged documents, all provided by the ministry lackey, and the aurors had let them through.

The bounty hunter stole a look at the boy that was supposed to be Templar, hoping for his expression to be equally as shocked as the rest of the hall. He was to be disappointed. The boy's smile was still on his face. The Russian squirmed uneasily as he realized the smile was directed towards him.

The two British aurors were slow to respond, but respond they did, and Sergei found himself the target of two furious wands.

The Russian shrugged off the discomfort from the boy, and grinned back at the Englishmen. His hand lifted the chain around his neck, and displayed the pendant to the hall.

"Cast at me, and I will be gone in an instant," he sneered.

The two aurors stopped, and growled.

"Portkeys," Sergei drawled, "Vonderful things," turning, he glared at the boy, and spat in his direction, "You are Templar? Your reputation will be in tatters once dis gets out."

The boy's smile grew. He stood up. The Russian's hand immediately hovered over the pendant.

"Sit down. I am in control here."

The boy didn't sit down and merely cocked his head to one side.

"What is your name?"

Sergei jeered.

"I am Sergei Vehniov, and I will be known to be the one to have finally bested Templar."

"You are gloating," it was an observation. Templar's words that is.

"Of course I am. I have von."

In retrospect, Sergei shouldn't have blinked. Things wouldn't have changed, but at least he could have seen what was coming.

The first thing the Russian felt was pain. Immense, horrendous, stabbing pain. Sergei looked down, where his hands should have hovered around the portkey-pendant. Every single one of his fingers had been broken. His wrist hung at an odd angle, snapped. The rest of his arm dangled, listless, bones shattered beyond repair. Sergei screamed. No sound came out. That was the second thing the Russian realized. His windpipe had been crushed. He started choking for air. Clawing at his throat with his one good hand. The third and last thing was the boy. He had been a good twenty feet away, and a solid, wooden table had been between him and the bounty hunter. Now, he was here, directly in front of the mercenary, gazing up into the towering Russian's panicked stare.

His wand was out, tip touching Sergei's belly.

"Sergei Vehniov," the boy said, slowly, teasingly, "I will remember that name when I carve it into your grave."

The wand lengthened, forming the unyielding edge of a sword, and Sergei Vehniov's world ended in a spray of blood.

They were in a forest. That was her first impression. Fleur spotted the remnants of a camp, dirtied, tattered tents sprung haphazardly about, and empty bottles of Firewhiskey scattered around the ground.

Fleur stumbled into the clearing, her mind reeling. Immediately, rough hands grabbed her, lingering over her breasts and making her skin crawl. Fleur struggled wildly, and swung her arm in a viscous slap. She was rewarded by a snarl of pain, and her accoster stepped back, rubbing his cheek.

"You're a tough little bint, aren't you?" the man sported a wild, uncombed beard, and his eyes held a tinge of madness within, "I'll make you scream for that."

The quarter-Veela reached for her wand, but more hands grabbed her and Fleur found herself helpless. Fear came, and Fleur was ashamed for feeling it.

"Once Sergei gets here," the same man she had slapped was saying, "We'll start, and we'll have some fun with you."

"Never had me a Veela before," another man leered at her, before tracing the outline of her lips with a dirtied finger.

"And don't you try that allure thing on us, or Inase will make you wish you hadn't been born."

Fleur shot a hopeful look towards the only woman in the group, but her hopes were dashed when the silver-dressed witch refused to meet her gaze.

"Gentlemen," the fake auror's aristocratic drawl came from behind the quarter-Veela, "Our mission has been accomplished. You will have your bounty when the girl has been suitably broken."

The fear turned into terror, and Fleur fought in her captors' grip. It was a futile struggle, and the quarter-Veela felt bile rising in her throat as unclean hands moved again for her chest.

"Please. Refrain from touching the girl."

The voice was hard, metallic, and raspy. Everyone turned, and saw plated armor and burning, emerald eyes.

"Greetings," the knight grated, "I am Hate. And today, I will be your executioner."

The American had talked about the knight. To Inase, that meant a man wearing plate, a warrior clad in shining armor that was a paragon of chivalry in the age of swords and shields. The being that was before her, was by that very definition, not a knight.

The figure stood seven feet tall, encased in a suit of plate blacker than the darkest of nights. A tattered cloak, ripped and torn, was draped over the thing's lamellar pauldrons, seemingly moving with a life of its own. Gauntleted fingers caressed the pommel of a massive broadsword, tip currently dug deep into the dirt. Its face was hidden by a cruel helm of black steel, with curved, forward-pointing horns that jutted from each side. And the eyes. The eyes were glowing orbs of fire, glaring from the helm's visor, filled with promised pain and barely-concealed malice.

It was like staring into the face of death.

One of the mercenaries, a hired thug from the streets, recovers his wits first, and whips his wand in a vertical cutting motion. A bright red beam careens towards the figure, a high-powered Stunning Spell capable of knocking its target senseless for a week. The beam connects, but the knight does not fall.

Inase watched with a sickening feeling in her gut as the spell seemed to go through the being, travelling into his body and out without any tangible effect. The Stupefy smashes into the ground and leaves a sizzling patch in the dirt.

"Now there is no need for that," the knight says amiably, as though talking to a guest in his own house, "Death will come for you on its own time. There is no need to hasten your own demise."

A plated hand gestures at their surroundings, and the knight speaks again.

"Enjoy the scenery. Look at the trees. The rocks. The sky. Enjoy these sights, for I assure you, they will be your last."

It was the utter conviction in the knight's voice that sent a chill up her spine.

"What are you idiots waiting for!" the young Frenchman from the meeting screamed out, his wand still hovering over the girl, "If one is not enough, cast together! Kill zat zing!"

A volley of spells and curses flew from a dozen wandtips. Inase added her own spells into the mix. A cast Diffindo severed the thick trunk of an aged tree. Bombardas covered the area in explosions. Reductos smashed and pulverized.

Through all of it, the knight stood there, and weathered the volley as though it was a light breeze.

They stopped casting thirty seconds later, panting with exertion. The knight was silent, and merely stared at them. Waiting. Watching.

"If we can't hurt it," one of the bounty hunters began, looking scared, "Surely it can't hurt us?"

The knight laughed. Harsh and grating. Everyone flinched.

"Please," it said, "Believe that with all your hearts. It will make the next few minutes all the more enjoyable."

The whoosh of an activating portkey caused the mercenary contingent to turn their heads. The Russian appeared, his body straight and erect, back facing them.

"Sergei!" the Frenchman snarled, "What iz ze meaning of zis?"

The Russian gave no reply, and like the knight, just stood there, his face hidden from view.

"What iz going on? What happened to ze boy?"

"Oh, I assure you," the voice that replied was distinctively not Sergei's, "He's quite safe and sound."

The man fell, mouth open, like a marionette with its strings cut, and in his place, the boy with unruly blonde hair stood, sword dripping with the Russian's blood. Fleur screamed into her captor's hand. The Frenchman cried out and dragged the girl back. The mercenaries quickly stepped forward to shield their employer. Wands were raised. The boy took no notice of the robed men and directed his attention to Fleur.

"Are you alright, Miss Delacour?"

The girl shook her head vigorously, though hope shined bright in her eyes. The Frenchman growled, and clutched her tighter.

"If you try anything," his wand pressed against Fleur's neck, "I will not hesitate to harm her."

The boy, Templar, smiled. It was a cold, haunted smirk. Without emotion. It made him look almost inhuman. He brandished his wand and incanted.

"Accio Fleur Delacour."

The Frenchman sneered and tightened his hold.

"If you zink that zuch a weak zpell-" and then he stopped talking, for Fleur Delacour was suddenly no longer there.

"Miss Delacour," Templar spoke mildly to the shaken girl in his arms, "Do be careful next time."

The girl was about to say something when the boy deposited a shining medallion in her palm. The Russian's portkey, Inase realized. And then the girl is gone, teleported back to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"Portkeys," the boy smiles as he regards the stunned mercenaries, "Wonderful things."

The sword melts. Flows like water, and forms into a wand. It twirls, spinning fluidly in Templar's palm, moving as though it was just a mere extension to the boy's arm, daring them to shoot the first spell. None dared. Inase couldn't explain it, but she felt scared. Petrified. The boy seemed to emit an aura of dread as he stood there, just smiling, and even the veteran cutthroats in their little band flinched under his gaze.

"This is an interesting place the lot of you have picked," Templar's words were friendly, though his eyes remained hard as stone. Inase noticed his wand still spinning in his hand, "Well warded. Unnoticeable. Even by wizards. One would think you were going to do something... unforgiveable... here."

All the men in the contingent cringed.

"They were," the knight's grating voice was heard from the back, and Inase turned to see it pacing back and forth like a caged animal, "They were going to rape her."

It was something so small, so slight, that Inase almost missed it. The boy's smile. It turned almost feral. And his eyes, they shone with a lethal gleam that made the witch take a step back in fear.

"Well. That does change things," Templar's tone was thoughtful, "You see, I was merely going to kill you. But now. Now that I know



what the lot of you wanted to do to my client, I am going to have to do something else."

"Y-You'll let us go?" one of the more naive members of their band asked hopefully.

"Oh I'm still going to kill you," the boy's smile was like a shark's, "I'm just going to have to kill you much more painfully."

Fleur felt the world spinning to a stop around her. She opened her eyes to see the Great Hall of Hogwarts and felt blessed relief spreading throughout her body. Before she could so much as move, a brown-haired cannonball careened into her.

"Oh Fleur!" Claire was babbling in French, tears spilling down her cheeks, "Are you alright? Are you hurt? I was so worried! You're not hurt are you? I was late coming from the carriage and couldn't help you! I wasn't there for you Fleur! Oh I'm so sorry!"

The quarter-Veela teetered unsteadily and held her friend close. She saw Aimeric walking towards them, emotions warring on his face.

"Those bastards... If I find those bastards..."

Fleur didn't hear the rest. Her headmistress had placed a heavy hand on her shoulder, and she looked up to see concern radiating from Madam Maxime's eyes.

"Are you alright, Miss Delacour?"

She saw the rest of the hall staring at her with wide, frightened eyes, saw the squads of British aurors that now had been called into the school, saw the Hogwarts professors regarding her with stern, worried gazes.

And then it hit her who just had saved her, and her numbness went away, replaced by fire.

"Bayard!" Fleur gasped out, and grasped tight Maxime's robes, "Bayard's still out there!"

The first wizard to die is a skinny, mustached man with a fat, bulbous nose. There is no warning. No sign. No indication that the

fight was supposed to begin. The knight thunders into the group from behind, and separates the man into two screaming halves. Blood spurts, freshly released, and covers the stunned bounty hunters with blotches of crimson.

That is enough to shock the mercenaries out of their reverie, and they scatter to avoid the plate-clad monster in their midst. One is not fast enough, and Inase recalled his name is Michael before the sword returns and pins him to the dirt like a wriggling insect.

Inase launched a silent Diffindo and a powered up Bombarda towards the knight, judging it to be the most lethal combatant of the pair. Just like before, both spells seemed to go through the shadow-wreathed being, the Diffindo carving a deep gouge into the ground and the Bombarda detonating in a copse of trees even further. The woman snarled, and wheeled to deal with the boy... just in time to see another man go down, a smoking crater in his chest.

The boy casted, moving fluidly, never stopping, seemingly unmindful of the bright beams of magic that spat and hissed around him. There was never the shimmering glow of a conjured Protego. Templar's defense was movement, a blur of random motions that made him almost impossible to target.

Not that the mercenaries were in lack of trying. Their constant barrage of spells was rearranging the forest floor, but none connected with the boy.

Templar ducked a borderline dark curse, and slashed his wand towards the ground. A pulsating burst of magic slammed into the earth, and in response, the dirt and loam convulsed as though if alive. Two wizards, one of whom who had sent the curse, were suddenly accosted by dozens of earthen hands, fingers of hardened soil and stone reaching and grasping. One wizard managed to stumble back into safety. The other was not so lucky, and wailed as the inhuman digits clutched tight to his limbs. They dragged him into the ground, forcing him waist deep into the churned dirt, before a massive, twisted thing rose from the earth. Swiftly, it formed into a hand, many times larger and heavier than the ones before. Inase watched, stunned, as the hand clutched tight its clay fingers to form a gigantic fist. And then it came down, like a hammer, and pulverized the trapped wizard into a bloody paste.

The wizard who had freed himself screamed out something incoherent, and began blasting the earthen fist with his wand. He never saw the armored figure until the sword exploded from his chest. Gurgling blood, the man turned his head to see emerald balefires staring at him before a steel fist seized him from the ground and lifted him high. The sword freed itself, then it came back, once, twice, three times, stabbing into the twitching body with blinding speed.

The knight laughed, an eerie, unnatural sound, and flung the dead man away like a ragdoll.

Inase shot three curses at the armored figure in rapid succession, watching helplessly as they passed through the thing's body as though it was thin air. The knight paid her no heed, and scythed down another mercenary in a spray of blood.

A Protego shimmered into place by her left and the witch wheeled on her feet to see a scrawny man dueling with Templar. The wizard blasted at the boy with high-powered Reductos and hastily-aimed Bombardas. His opponent danced through the explosions, swerved to avoid a beam at chest level, and jerked his wand towards the protective barrier. The Protego shattered like glass, and as its conjurer staggered back from the magical backlash, a thin beam from the boy's wand transfixed the bounty hunter like a hurled spear.

The man's skin dissolved. It cackled like burning paper, shriveled, and then seeped away, revealing human anatomy at its barest, bloodiest form. Inase wanted to retch. The man collapsed in a screaming heap, clutching at his raw flesh that seemed to throb and pulse. His death would not be quick.

The boy turned, ducking under the sickly green of a Killing Curse, and incinerated the caster with a jet of bright orange fire.

Inase again targeted the boy, launching spells, hexes, even the occasional disarming spell to somehow halt the young killer. None of them even grazed him. He was too quick for her spells to hit and his movements too erratic for her to anticipate. And he wasn't even sweating.

Templar sidestepped a Bludgeoning Curse, sent two Severing Charms back to back in the span it took for a human to blink, and

detached both arms from his target. The bounty hunter screamed, and staggered back, twin arcs of crimson spilling from his shoulders. The boy's Reducto smashed into his chest a second later, and a flopping, battered body rolled to a stop at Inase's feet.

It was then that Inase knew she was going to die. The knight had hinted on it. Even proclaimed it. She had thought he was bluffing. But now, the American's words rang true. The witch turned on her heel to see men falling back in disarray, casting blindly, futilely. Some were even running away. They couldn't apparate here. Not with the wards in place. They didn't get far. A wave from the boy's wand turned the very forest alive, and Inase averted her eyes from the scene of men being ripped to bloody pieces by thorned branches.

The witch sighed resignedly. She looked up to see the sky.

It was, as the knight said, very beautiful.

I place my hands on the bounty hunter's cheeks, softly, almost comfortingly. He is an average man, with average looks. With beard stubble underneath his chin. Chestnut colored hair. His eyes dart in their sockets, desperate to escape. I wonder if he has a wife to support. Or perhaps children to feed.

"M-Monster..." he slurs through blood-flecked lips, "Monster..."

"Thank you," I say to him, and my hands jerk. The ugly crack of snapping bone follows, and the body slumps, limp and lifeless, "for the compliment."

I push the corpse away, and am greeted with the sight of the last three. One is the Frenchman, the fake auror, and his wand is pointed towards me in a shaking hand. Another is a woman, with porcelain beauty and lustrous black hair. The last one is a bounty hunter. British, maybe. The man is white with fear.

Across from me, Hate yanks his blade free from a brutalized body.

"Three more to kill," his voice is like iron, unyielding, strong, "Three more to send to Hades."

That jolts one of the three into action.

"Expelliarmus!" the mercenary screams out. I watch, bemused, as Hate's sword is ripped from his grasp. The blade hurtles towards a nearby tree, and buries half its length into the aged bark.

Hate's response is to chuckle. And then he moves, crossing the stretch of ground between him and the bounty hunter in great, distance-eating strides. The man has time to take a single step back. Then Hate is before him, and the knight's ironclad hands come together in a resounding clap. The mercenary's head bursts open, explodes outwards like a ripe fruit, and decorates the surrounding area with blood and brain matter.

The woman is sharp enough to launch herself away. The Frenchman is not nearly as fast, and screams as Hate's blood-stained gauntlets hauls him high into the air.

I walk towards him. Past a groaning wizard holding half his face together. My wand hand snaps in his direction, and the groans cease forever.

The Frenchman struggles in Hate's grip, but it is a lost fight. I halt in front of him. He tries to put on a brave face. I can at least give him credit for that.

"Y-You won't get anyzing out of me!" the man cries out. The fear in his eyes is excruciatingly beautiful, "I won't tell you a zing!"

"That is good," I smile back, "I don't want to know."

I point my wand to his forehead. His façade breaks like brittle iron.

"Don't kill me! Please! Zis wasn't my plan! It waz Montague's! I-I'm only a low official! I just wanted a promotion! Don't kill me! I beg you! I wouldn't have hurt her! On Merlin's Oath I zwear! Please! Give me a chance!"

"Life gives you only one chance not to die," my smile is sincere now, and that terrifies him even more, "And you have wasted that chance."

I glance up, ignoring the man's blubbering, to meet the stare of emerald fire.

"Hate."

A command.

"Gladly," the knight says back.

Plate-clad arms lift the Frenchman higher. The man manages one more scream. And then Hate pulls. Flesh tears. Bones snap. Blood fountains into the air, and now Hate holds two men.

A few droplets patter onto my face. Like rain.

Hate discards the tattered meat from his hands. He turns to regard the scene before us. Corpses litter the ground, faces contorted into expressions of fear and pain. I can sense his satisfaction.

"Blood and fire," Hate breathes, "I am content."

The knight then sees the woman, the last one standing, a look of resignation stitched across her countenance.

"But one remains."

"We don't kill women," I remind him, "Or children."

"A pity," Hate drawls, and cracks his knuckles.

I turn to the witch, taking note of her appearance. Black hair. Bundled in an efficient pony-tail. Her face is pale, paler than most, but her blood-red lips contrasts with her skin most alluringly. She is beautiful, and were I any other man, I would have cared.

The wand in her grip is steady, and I admire her courage in the face of death.

"You are free to leave," I say to her, noting with approval her combat stance has not dropped, "We do not kill women."

"I can't," her response surprises me, "I cannot."

"You..." I pause, wondering, "... cannot?"

"No. I cannot."

The wand is dropped, and the witch sheds her damaged robes. Armor glistens from underneath, a curved chestplate supported by layers of lacquered leather. And then the blade comes out, sliding from its sheathe with methodical slowness.

Hate smiles beside me.

"A swordsman."

I ignore him.

"Samurai?"

"No," she replies, "But close enough."

My brow rises.

"We do not want to fight you." I attempt again.

The woman laughs darkly. It is a surprisingly pleasing sound.

"You certainly wanted to fight them," her blade points to the corpses that surround us.

"They were different. Leave. It is not worth it. I do not want to fight you."

"I have no choice in the matter," she says sadly, "For Honor's sake."

The witch brings the blade to her shoulder in a two-handed grip.

"Very well," the words are like ash in my mouth, "Hate."

The knight's sword frees itself from the tree, and thuds into his hand. He mirrors the woman's stance.

"Gladly," he replies and then charges.

Inase Takahashi had dueled with blades before. It was like an elegant dance. Purity of form, and purity of motion. Anticipating the enemy's moves and preventing him from anticipating yours. Steel on

ringing steel. A craft of death based on skill and cunning, finesse and grace.

The knight possessed neither finesse nor grace.

It lunged at her, sword chopping in a vicious, vertical motion. Inase raised her katana to block and staggered when the black blade connected. There was an unholy strength behind the knight's strike, an unstoppable, powerful force that could not be denied. Inase's limbs felt like they were on fire. And that was only the first blow.

The return stroke Inase dodged, the blade carving through the air where her head had been scant milliseconds before. And then it came back, faster than she thought was possible, and she flung herself away to avoid being hacked in two.

"Running are we?" the knight taunted her in its metallic voice, "So much for honor."

Inase gritted her teeth. She could not win this fight through conventional means. Her opponent was stronger, faster, and more experienced. And seemingly inhuman. She would have to get past the knight's guard somehow, and strike when he was at his most vulnerable.

The witch backed away, to a distance where the sword could still reach her, but gave her ample space to maneuver. The knight lashed out again, a horizontal sweeping motion that she dodged. The return swing she blocked, and regretted the decision when her muscles burned from the exertion.

This continued, the knight hacking at her with machine-like precision, and her barely managing to keep up. Every swing came inches away from ending her life. Every blow felt like a sledgehammer when her own blade rose to deny. She had lost count of time, but it couldn't have been more than a minute. And that made her feel weak. Useless. To be so vulnerable when the fight had barely begun.

The knight swings again, an overhead blow. She dances away, wincing as the blade passed mere centimeters from her shoulder. The sword smashes into the ground, and sticks there, lodged deep into the dirt.



Inase tensed. Here was a chance to end this. Her katana rose high and she brought it down on her foe's unguarded back.

The knight's response is to laugh.

A massive, blackened gauntlet arrests her motion, and the witch's eyes widened as the knight's grip tightened on her arm like steel. The second gauntlet leaves the sword, still embedded in the earth, and hammers into her stomach.

Her chestplate, forged by the finest blacksmith in her village, layered by protective wards and charms to be nearly impervious, dents.

Inase felt the air leave from her body in an almighty rush, felt her feet losing purchase on the ground. Her vision darkened, blurred. She had the impression of being lifted bodily into the air, and she blinked away the haziness to see the knight's ironclad visage.

It was, frankly, a terrifying sight.

Burning, hellish orbs stared at her from the cruelly wrought helm, and the blackness hidden beneath seemed to smile at her pain.

"Still so eager to die?" the knight hissed into her face.

Inase glared back, at this monster, this demon, and spat in its visor. The knight laughed again, and flung her away, physically hurled her through the air as if she weighed nothing. She landed hard. Right at the feet of the boy. The witch thanked her ancestors her hold on her katana had remained strong. Growling, she rose to one knee, ignoring the pain that flared everywhere, and stabbed her blade into the knight's master.

She expected blood. And there was blood. Her own.

Inase stared down in shock at the blade that emerged from her right shoulder, dripping with crimson ichor. Her katana was hovering over the boy's robed chest, the tip tantalizingly close to piercing his skin. And then pain overwhelmed her, forcing her to the ground.

"You will not harm my lord," the knight hissed from above her. Unlike before, its voice was tainted by wrath, and Inase inwardly rejoiced at doing something, however small, to annoy it.

As though if sensing her thoughts, the knight twisted his sword, and she screamed as the pain increased tenfold.

"You are losing your touch, Hate," Templar spoke mildly, seemingly unfazed at how close he had come to death, "She almost killed me."

"Apologies my lord," to Inase's surprise, the knight's tone had changed. It sounded almost remorseful, "A mere slip of the hand. I assure you. It will not happen again."

The boy gave no notice he had heard his companion's apology. Instead, he leaned down, squatted on his haunches and gave her a curious look. If he was just a boy, then the expression would have been innocent. Cute even. On Templar's face, it resembled a cold leer.

"Why are you trying so hard?" the boy asked, and Inase nearly choked on laughter at the insane question, "I gave you your life. You should have just walked away."

The knight's sword impaled her to the ground, pinning her like some trapped animal. She could only look up and even that caused her pain.

"The contract," she spat, not surprised that blood came with the spittle, "The magical contract."

"You signed a magical contract?" Templar blinked at her, "As a mercenary?"

"Yes," the witch ground out, "Now stop questioning me and kill me."

The boy ignored her request, and stared at her.

"No contract between a client and a mercenary is bound by magic," Templar said slowly, as though if pondering something, "Otherwise, there would be very few of us left. The only magic that goes into it is the ink. And that is only when the client is particularly affluent."

That stunned her. Shocked her. The pain that had been like a thousand knives before now became a dull throb as her mind worked hard to understand this revelation.

"But the Frenchmen-"

"Would have written down the contract on regular parchment. No magic. Did you swear a magical-binding oath to them?"

"No but-"

"Then you would have suffered no penalties for abandoning the contract."

The pain from the knight's sword became a pinprick compared to the pain of betrayal.

"The Russian..." Inase gritted her teeth, "The Russian said I would lose my magic if I did not help."

"Then the Russian was lying," Templar shrugged nonchalantly, "I am not surprised. He was experienced and you were not. He took advantage of you."

"What!" Inase struggled briefly, but the blade through her shoulder prevented her from doing much besides glare, "What do you mean!"

"You are new to this work, yes?" the boy continued on when she nodded, "Something you have to understand about the mercenary business, lady. Never trust anyone you are working with. No doubt the Russian understood you would leave if the contract's more... disgusting... details came to light. So he lied to keep your talents."

"But I didn't trust him!" Inase protested.

"You did enough to believe that you were bound by a magical contract," the boy replied, his expression inscrutable, "And enough to stand by and watch as a young woman was to be raped in front of you."

Inase turned her head away, shame-faced.

"You came from somewhere remote?" Templar's question caused her to flinch.

"Yes. From a village in Japan."

"And you did not think to learn the methods of our line of work? Did not think to understand how contracts worked?"

"I-I thought it was about honor," she admitted, and the boy narrowed his eyes.

"Honor?"

"Yes. My father and his father before that. They all turned to mercenary work. My entire clan has. We extol the virtues of honor, and we would rather die than fail the contract. I was taught that."

"Your name, lady?"

"Inase Takahashi."

"Well," the boy's face was stony, "Inase Takahashi. You are an idiot."

Inase gaped like a fish.

"A very pretty idiot, granted" Templar continued, his face still an expressionless mask, "But an idiot nonetheless. Your father most likely stepped out of his village, received his contract, and then got himself killed when the wizard he was supposed to be working with cursed him from behind to take all the bounty. Your grandfather before that probably disappeared from the face of the Earth when he mentioned Honor to a rabble of greedy, backstabbing mercenaries. And now, you, Inase Takahashi, have committed the same mistake. So. You are an idiot"

Inase wanted to argue that what the boy was saying was false, that he was lying. But her father had vanished without a trace. His last words to her had been about upholding the honor of her clan. He had not come back since. In fact, many men of the Tempest Moon clan had never come back from their work. There had been no packages filled with gold as promised. No news of titles earned or battles won. It was a mystery then. And her mother, her smart, intelligent, perfect mother, had claimed that her father had become so successful and there were so many contracts for him to claim, that he had no time to write. She had believed it then. Now... Now it was like a veil being lifted before her eyes.

The sword was wrenched away, and Inase gasped in pain at its sudden removal.

"I still say we kill her," the knight snarled, "She almost took your life, my lord."

"We do not kill women and children," the boy repeated, stern, "And besides, she would not have come close if you weren't so eager."

"You won't kill me?" asked Inase, and pushed herself up with her good arm. The pain was still there, but it was forgotten. Had to be forgotten for what came next, "Why?"

"I won't. My honor," the boy stressed, and Inase winced, "forbids it."

That was all she needed. Her forehead touched the soil. Her body, battered and wounded, prostrated itself before the boy.

"Teach me."

"What?" Templar seemed genuinely surprised. The expression didn't match well with his face.

"Teach me."

"Teach you what?"

"Everything. About this profession. About honor. I beg of you," she hesitated, and then uttered the words she thought she would never have to say in her lifetime, "My lord."

The knight laughed. In humor this time.

"Something funny, Hate?"

"Dark humor, my lord. Black comedy. You would not understand."

"Hmm," emerald eyes turned from the knight to her, and Inase felt as though they were gazing into her very soul. An eternity passed, at least that's what it seemed like to her, with every moment being scrutinized by the boy's uncompromising gaze.

"She could be useful, my lord," the knight spoke, startling her. She had not expected it of all things to come to her aid, "An extra pair of eyes on the girl would be helpful."

"You were pushing for her death earlier, Hate," Templar replied, "What changed your mind?"

"She is skilled somewhat with the blade. As well as wand-work. What else needs to be said?"

"I do not need a partner for this job."

"No. Not a partner. But a servant? A slave, perhaps? One who is unfalteringly loyal to us and no one else?"

"What you are suggesting, Hate, infringes upon my honor," the boy had developed a distasteful look.

The knight shrugged.

"Then make her a soldier. A warrior dedicated to our cause and our cause alone. Force her to bleed our enemies."

Templar seemed to ponder this. His eyes flashed, decision seemingly made, and Inase wondered what the Fates had in store for her. And then he spoke.

"Rise."

## Chapter 7: Aftermath

Severus Snape, contrary to popular belief, did not hate children. He certainly disliked them, some more than others, especially the Potter brat and his Weasley sidekick, but to say he hated them would be a grave subversion of the facts. The young heir of Malfoy also rankled on his nerves, sometimes even more so than the Boy-Who-Lived, but that too was a secret. No, Severus Snape did not hate children. Just detested them.

But there were a few, a select few that the potions professor grudgingly approved of if not for their intelligence, then for their cunning. Daphne Greengrass was one. Highly intelligent with a wit to match. Tracey Davis was another. Not as intelligent as Greengrass, but cunning in her own sly way. Blaise Zabini was another student worthy of Snape's approval, silent and brooding, but utterly lethal like his mother. These were examples of what ideal Slytherins should be. Ambitious. Shrewd. Patient.

And after today, Snape had a sneaking suspicion he would add another student to his list of hidden favorites.

Bayard. Just Bayard. No last name to pin him to a family. No long-winded history of a magical family with gold in their coffers. Just a normal, charming boy. Snape almost laughed out loud. He had known the day the boy stepped into his classroom that he would be different. The child hid it well, better than any Slytherin, but Snape had discerned it almost immediately. The boy was a killer. His involvement with the Death Eaters had long ago taught him to distinguish these things from the rest. He could tell from the way the boy moved, how he talked, how his eyes shone with a lethality that lurked just beyond the surface. There was a killer stalking the halls of Hogwarts, and none knew it save Severus Snape.

It was an alarming thought, and were it Sprout or Flitwick that was privy to such information, then the boy would have been come under close scrutiny, perhaps even expelled. But Snape was no bumbling fool of a Hufflepuff or excitable wizard of a Ravenclaw. He understood that the act of killing was sometimes unavoidable, and in rare cases, justified. Killers weren't all maniacs, though a significant portion was. And as for Bayard, the boy was certainly no lunatic. There was a professionalism in him, hidden so well that those who hadn't seen death, hadn't killed, would never be able to find.

Death Eaters killed for the sake of their own pleasure. The boy killed for the sake of killing.

Professional. Snape fought down the urge to laugh out loud again. Yes, he certainly liked Bayard, if not for his abilities, then for his discipline. That, and the boy was currently making life a living hell for both Black and Potter.

The potions professor smirked as he glanced around the room. They were in the Headmaster's Office, with all the Heads of House in attendance. There was McGonagall, looking stern as usual. Sprout was wringing her hands nervously as she watched the proceedings. Flitwick was wearing a thoughtful look. And Dumbledore? The old man was staring at Bayard with an intensity that made Snape recoil. Only once had he seen such a look from the aged wizard, and that was when he had come to the Headmaster with Voldemort's plan to attack the Potters. Snape shivered. That was a memory he did not want to recall. Yet, at the same time, he found himself curious.

The boy had been quick. Almost too quick for the naked eye to see. Certainly too quick for his fellow students to see. His wand had transformed into a sword and at the same time, he had grabbed the wizard's portkey. And then he was gone, whisked away along with the man. There had not even been time for the blood to spray. But Snape had seen it, and the potions professor was sure Dumbledore had as well. Which begged the question why. Why Dumbledore allowed Bayard to remain at Hogwarts. The old man was lenient on many things, but killing was not one of them.

It was a curious puzzle, and Snape doubted he would solve it by himself.

The potions master continued his survey of the room. There was the French witch that had been kidnapped, her face tightly controlled, but thick with emotion. Her headmistress, a giant of a woman with regal features stood behind her, a large hand over the girl's shoulder. Karakoff was here too, though it was probably for nothing good. Igor was a slimy, conniving bastard, and Snape was sure that whatever was repeated here today would soon be in the ears of Durmstrang's potential champions.



Of course, these were all the backdrop to the play being performed in front of him, and what a play it was!

Bayard stood in the middle of the room, face friendly, eyes alert. James and Sirius paced around him, interrogating the boy to best of their abilities. Which wasn't much. Every question they shot at him was returned with an answer that seemed to be useful, but was in the end, utterly uninformative. Both auror captains had been at it for twenty minutes, and so far they had gotten the boy to admit his name, age, and his favorite color.

Snape snickered. That had derailed the conversation for quite a while.

"All we want to know," James rubbed his forehead tiredly, "Is what happened to the others. Miss Delacour tells us there was quite a few."

"And as I keep telling you, I incapacitated them." the boy replied, and Snape crowed inwardly at Potter's exasperated sigh, "All of them."

"If you incapacitated them, then where are their bodies?" Sirius growled from the boy's left, watching him like a guard dog, "They should be bound in ropes, or stunned."

"I incapacitated them in a more... permanent manner," Bayard smiled. Snape shuddered. No man, be he child or adult should ever be able to smile like that.

"So you admit you killed them?" Sirius wheeled on the boy, a triumphant expression on his face.

Before Bayard could reply, the French witch leapt to his defense, outrage visible on every line of her body.

"How dare you slander Bayard like zis! If it hadn't been for him, zen... zen... I wouldn't be here. Zhose men said zey were going to break me!"

Snape's features twisted in disgust. Rape had been one of the Death Eaters' favorite pastimes. And he hated them all the more for it.

The other professors wore equal masks of revulsion, and both Potter and Black stopped pacing to turn to the girl.

"Miss Delacour," James began, "I know he saved you, but you have to understand that he may be potentially dangerous."

At this, the boy's eyes flashed, and his posture changed ever so slightly. Snape sneered. None had noticed, save him.

"Dangerous! Non!" the girl was enraged, and slipped habitually into French as she cursed at the aurors, "Il m'a sauvé la vie, et je ne l'accepterai pas pour lui d'être calomnié de telle manière! Tell zem Madam Maxime! I can't stand for zis!"

The giant headmistress nodded at her student's words.

"I cannot believe zat your aurors will mock and deride zis boy for saving his charge," Maxime glowered at the two men in question, and Snape chuckled at their expressions. This would be definitely something to save for his pensieve, "In France, Bayard would have been honored and praised for hiz valor. I zee that England haz no zuch outlook."

"That's not true ma'am," Sirius was speaking now, but the Heir of Black looked uncomfortable, "We appreciate Mister Bayard's efforts, and thank him for it, but we need to ask him these questions."

"Iz zat so? Zhen why haz your questioning been more like an interrogation?" Maxime turned her glare to the Headmaster, "I do not understand Dumbleby-door why you allow zis to continue. Bayard haz been misaligned badly, and I will not stand for zis miscarriage of justice."

"Perhaps James and Sirius," Dumbledore said pensively, "It would be best to let the matter drop. Bayard has performed exceptionally, this you must admit."

"And be sure to reward the boy too!" Flitwick squeaked.

"Albus," James sighed, "We don't want to do this anymore than you do, but we need to know what happened. The band might have

connections elsewhere, and that may lead to students being in danger at Hogwarts."

"A danger that I assure you has been completely neutralized," Bayard glanced up at the two red-robed men, "Perhaps if the aurors assigned to our protection were not remiss in their duties, then this danger would never have materialized."

Both men stiffened at the implied insult. Snape's lips twitched.

"We take our jobs very seriously," Potter lectured solemnly, "And the aurors guarding the Tournament are our best."

"Then pray tell me, how did those three get in?" the boy wore an innocent expression, but every word from his mouth was barbed, "Two of them couldn't even speak French. Did you even check their credentials?"

"We did," Black's face was pained, "And everything looked fine."

"Looked fine? And it never occurred to you that the documents were forged? That delegating a single auror under your command to check in with the Ministry's International Division or even the French Embassy for an explanation would have revealed the farce for what it was?"

Both Sirius and James looked embarrassed. Snape's lips were threatening to form into a full-fledged smile.

"Now, now," Dumbledore broke in before the two aurors could be further humiliated, "Sirius and James performed admirably under trying circumstances. I do not doubt for a moment that we are well protected by them."

"Which is why Miss Delacour was kidnapped from under their very noses," Bayard drawled, "Well protected indeed."

A hundred points to Slytherin, Snape mentally crowed.

"Nevertheless," Dumbledore said mildly, "I have the utmost confidence in our aurors. Just as I have the utmost confidence in you, Mister Bayard."

The boy nodded, and dropped the subject. The potions professor was disappointed. He had hoped for more humiliation for his childhood enemies.

"I believe, James," the old wizard turned to Potter, eyes twinkling, "that our group discussion has come to an end."

Snape snorted. Only in Albus Dumbledore's mind could an interrogation remotely match with 'group discussion'.

"Yes, of course Albus," James nodded and turned to leave. Sirius grasped his sleeve tightly and stopped him.

"Before we go," Black said smoothly, "Perhaps Mr. Bayard would allow us to take a look at his wand? To perform the Prior Incantato? It is standard Ministry procedure after all."

Snape rolled his eyes. Aurors weren't allowed to perform wand-checks without direct approval from their higher-ups in the Ministry. Black's audacity hadn't lessened with age it seemed. The man was lying, and against well-known regulation at that. McGonagall's nostrils flared, and Snape stepped back from his fellow Head of House. The deputy headmistress was a stickler to the rules, and having one violated so badly in front of her was sure to incur her wrath. Dumbledore also looked disquieted, and Snape was sure either him or McGonagall would come to the boy's defense.

"Of course," Bayard said, and the potions professor stared at him in shock.

Stupid, stupid boy! You could have gotten away with everything, but now they'll discover every spell you've used!

Snape grimaced inwardly as Black snatched the boy's offered wand as though it was gold. Sirius blinked, hesitated, and weighed the blackened stick in his hand.

"This is steel."

Snape felt his trepidation disappear, replaced by curiosity. Steel was never used for wands. It was an inert object. A horrible medium. Magic couldn't flow through it. At least, that's what his trips to Ollivander's taught him.

"Your powers of deduction astounds me," the boy replied dryly.

Sirius ignored the jibe, and waved his own wand, incanting the words.

"Prior Incantato."

Nothing came out.

"Prior Incantato," the heir of Black tried again.

Nothing.

Snape's brows rose. He had expected a collection of curses and spells to materialize. If not of the dark variety, then certainly everyday charms that no wizard or witch could do without. How very, very curious.

Sirius handed the wand back to its owner, a mixture of shame and anger warring on his face.

"Perhaps you will believe me now," Bayard stated simply, and pocketed his wand in a smooth, fluid motion.

Black glowered at the boy, and then wheeled on his feet, and stormed out of the office. James glanced apologetically around the room and turned to the boy.

"I'm sorry about all of this," Potter said awkwardly, "But it was necessary. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," the boy smiled.

James nodded, and took one last look around the room before following Black through the door.

"Well," Dumbledore clapped his hands together, "That certainly was a wonderful meeting. But alas, all good things must come to an end. Professors, if you would return to your students? I'm sure they would be delighted to know that classes will be cancelled for today."

McGonagall nodded stiffly, and left the room, followed by Flitwick and Spout. Snape stared at the boy for a bit longer, then moved for the door, robes billowing behind him.

"If it is possible, Madam Maxime, I would like to speak with Bayard in private."

The Headmistress of Beauxbatons slowly turned to regard him. Dumbledore matched the regal gaze with his own. She had a great deal of respect for him, but not an ounce of trust. Albus didn't blame her. Not after what happened today.

"If you are willing," Maxime turned to the boy.

Emerald eyes stared into his own, and Dumbledore fought the urge to look away.

"I will be along shortly," the boy said back.

Maxime nodded, and guided the Fleur towards the door. The young witch appeared distinctively unhappy, and stole wistful looks back at her savior. She obviously wanted him for company. Dumbledore's magical sight flared, and the Headmaster watched as a shadowy tendril ghosted from the boy and wrapped itself around the girl. It stayed there, settled over her shoulders like an incorporeal cloak, drifting after her as she disappeared through the doorway. Then, the door slammed shut, and silence prevailed in his office.

"Harry?"

The boy's expression remained neutral. Unreadable. It was like staring into a marble statue. Then, the face changed, the cheekbones lowered, the scar turned deep, the hair turned black from gold, and suddenly Albus Dumbledore was staring into the eyes of Harry Potter.

"It was always a challenge," the boy said, gazing politely back at the Headmaster, "To hide my appearance. Everything else can change. But my eyes. And the scar. They refuse to be hidden."

Albus pushed himself up from his seat, and made a step towards Harry, his arms spread to embrace the long lost child.

Harry took a step back, and maintained the distance.

Albus's heart sank.

"It would be best, Headmaster," the youngest Potter said smoothly, "If you refrained from doing that."

"Harry," Dumbledore's voice quivered, "You have no idea how sorry I am... How very sorry I am..."

The boy shrugged.

"It was not your fault, Headmaster," the smile was on his face, but those emerald eyes were like ice, "I do not blame you."

Dumbledore did look away this time.

"I have wronged you, my boy," the aged wizard began slowly, "If only I had not proclaimed Adam to be the one that struck down Voldemort..."

Harry's eyes flashed.

"That I would be by their side?" the boy finished, and Dumbledore winced at his refusal to use Lily or James's names, "That I would be safe and happy? That I would be with a loving, caring family?"

"Yes," the Headmaster responded sadly.

"Spare me your condolences, Headmaster," Albus jerked his gaze back to the boy, surprised at how cruel he sounded, "There is nothing now. Nothing for them, and nothing against them."

"They have changed, Harry," Dumbledore said, brushing a stray tear from his eyes, "Changed for the better. They aren't the same people you remember."

"And it only took me leaving for them to figure it out," Albus looked away again, ashamed that he had not seen the divide within the family earlier, "What wonderful people."

"They love you, Harry," the Headmaster tried, then stopped, knowing how foolish he sounded.

"Love... me?" the boy's voice had grown as cold as his eyes, "Tell me, Headmaster. How they would have... loved... me."

Albus remained silent.

"There is nothing left," Harry stated, almost whispered, "There can be nothing left."

"They are your family," Dumbledore's tone was tired, defeated.

"They are. What is your point?"

"And you don't feel anything for them? Anything at all?"

"Headmaster," the boy said the first word in such a cold tone that Albus was sure the temperature in the room had dropped by a few degrees, "Tell me. Enlighten me. Am I supposed to feel something for them?"

"The Lily and James Potter you know are dead and gone, Harry," Dumbledore tried again, "Can you at least try? If not for yourself then for their sakes?"

As soon as the words left his mouth Dumbledore knew they were the wrong words. Harry's face remained blank and emotionless. But his eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

"For... their sake?"

The room grew quiet at once. So quiet that one could hear a pin drop. The portraits on the wall, who had all been staring at the conversation in morbid fascination, shrank back into their frames in fear.

"For their sake," Albus repeated, wincing as he noticed that the surface of his desk seemed to be almost frozen to the touch.

Harry slowly stood up. The old wizard watched him do so with pain in his heart. The boy smiled again. It did not match his eyes.



"It has been an honor to meet with the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," the voice that entered Dumbledore's ears was deadpan and utterly lifeless.

"Harry-"

"Is there anything else, Headmaster?" the boy was unfalteringly polite, "I would like to join my fellow students at the carriage."

Albus looked glumly at Harry, and then nodded. The boy's hair changed back into its original gold color, and his features melted to form the face of Bayard.

"Promise me, Harry," the Headmaster began softly, "That if you have any troubles... with anything... that you will come to me," Dumbledore swallowed the lump in his throat, "I owe you that much at the very least."

"I will take that into consideration, Headmaster," Harry's tone remained polite, but Albus knew that he wouldn't, and this would be the last time he met Harry Potter face to face.

One final look from those emerald green eyes, one last smile chillier than the coldest of winter nights, and the boy was gone, stalking through the opened door.

Dumbledore watched him go, and sighed.

"Good luck, Harry," he whispered, "And may Fortune always smile upon you."

Inase grimaced as she stared up into the infirmary ceiling. The place had a clinical smell to it, a wafting, surgical scent that the witch was not fond of. Not that she could do anything but complain. The woman in charge of this place, a Madam Pomfrey, reminded Inase of a mother bear in nurse's clothing, and had immediately restrained her in an empty bed with warnings of not to move. A few hours later, Inase had felt better. The pain was still there, but the wound to her shoulder was closing rapidly, and whatever blood she had lost in her fight with the knight had been replenished by a foul-tasting, but effective draught.

The nurse had checked on her again, and then left, bustling out of the room muttering about replenishing her stock of potions. That left her alone, resting atop a bed, covered in a flawless white sheet. At least that's what it would seem to any bystander. The witch knew she was not alone. Her eyes were riveted to the darkest corner in the infirmary. She couldn't sense it, let alone see it, but the presence was there. A dark, lethal aura that reminded her of blood and slaughter.

"You are unnatural," she said to the shadows in the corner, hoping it would respond.

"And you haven't figured this out already?" the shadows replied, and Inase shifted uncomfortably as emerald irises materialized to stare at her. The eyes were followed swiftly by arms, legs, a chest, and finally, the blackish vapor coalesced into the sneering, hateful helm. Inase blinked, and the knight sat across from her, gauntlets resting on the pommel of his sword, "Greetings Lotus."

"I don't like that name," she snapped.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"It is utterly unimaginative."

"You are in the business of killing for profit. Simple names are good."

"I still don't like it," Inase muttered.

"It was better than the one I had suggested for you."

"And what name was that?"

"Idiot."

The witch growled, and moved for her wand on the table. The pain punished her, caused her to bite her tongue, and hexing the knight into oblivion became the last thing on her mind.

"Don't strain yourself girl," the knight's voice never ceased to be grating, never lost its metallic timbre, "It will take a week for you to recover, and my lord will not be pleased with any delays."

"You talk as though if I was merely an object. To be used and discarded," her voice was bitter. She had sworn her loyalty to the boy, but her pride still smarted.

"And are we not? To serve our lord with undying devotion? To fight and die by his command?"

Inase did not reply, and instead gazed glumly at a cluster of empty vials sitting on Pomfrey's desk.

"How did you find us?" the witch asked into the silence that followed.

"Find you?" the knight's tone seemed to be amused.

"Yes. We warded the place. Layered it with enchantments so you could only get in through portkey. Apparation wouldn't work. So how did you find us?"

The knight crossed its plated arms, and leaned back.

"Some things," it said, growled, "Are better if kept secret. If my lord deems you worthy of the truth, he will tell you in his own time."

Inase furrowed her brows.

"Is it that bad?"

"Bad? Certainly not. But you will not understand. And it will lead you to asking more questions. Questions I cannot answer."

Inase closed her eyes as she contemplated the knight's response. It was a cryptic answer, and the witch found herself intrigued.

"When you appeared into the clearing, I knew we were in trouble," she admitted, her eyes opening again to see the infirmary ceiling, "You radiated something... terrifying."

The knight laughed. Inase winced at the grating tone.

"Death clings to you when you have killed over and over again."

"You are something unnatural," Inase said again, and swiveled her head to stare into the being's glowing green eyes, "You aren't human."

"Definitely not," was the reply.

"Then just what are you?"

The knight chuckled.

"Emotion. Feeling. Hate."

Inase frowned.

"I don't understand."

"I expect you not to. By the defined laws of magic of you wand-wizards, I am an impossibility. Even by muggle standards, with their dull-witted attempts at structuring the world, I should not exist. But here I am. Called into existence by the emotion of an eight-year old boy. Clad in plate made from shadows and wielding a weapon forged in darkness," the knight lifted his broadsword, and Inase watched in horrid fascination as garlands of black energy hummed and pulsed around the blade, "I am, as you mortals call it, chaos. Disorder. Pandemonium."

"That... doesn't make sense."

"Yes," Inase got the feeling the knight was smiling at her, though how it could with its face hidden by the horned helm, she didn't know, "Chaos never does. But that is the most adequate description of me."

"You're... You're influencing him aren't you?" the witch breathed, a sudden terror in her stomach, "Making him do those things? Controlling him from the inside?"

"Influence? Yes. Control? No. Not even close. My lord's mind is ironclad. Stronger than the plate that shields my body. I could not get in even if I tried."

Inase paused and digested this information, trying hard not to show the black-clad figure just how unnerved she was.

"So then where did he get his strange code of honor from? I would not expect you to influence him with chivalry of all things."

The knight's gauntlet twitched, plated digits crawling over the pommel of his blade like armored spiders.

"Most children are malleable, you know," the shadow-being stared at her, "Like soft clay you can mold them, shape them into your heart's desire. But some. Some have a certain something, a certain quality to them that cannot be changed, no matter how much they try to hide it. My lord possesses one such quality, and it will stay with him until the end of his days, for better or for worse."

"And that quality is honor?"

"No."

Inase waited for an answer, but only silence greeted her.

"Are you going to tell me?" she asked after a few moments.

"No," the knight smiled back.

"You're being annoying on purpose, aren't you?" the witch growled out, exasperated.

Emerald fire danced with amusement behind the sneering helm.

"What do you know of knights, Inase Takahashi?"

She found him by the lakeside, perched on an outcrop of rock, watching the setting sun. He rose as she approached, the charming smile and warm eyes affixed to his face.

"Miss Delacour," Bayard nodded to her.

Fleur swallowed the lump in her throat, and moved to stand beside him.

"Thank you..." she hesitated, not knowing what else to say.

"Your thanks is appreciated, but unnecessary," the boy inclined his head towards her, "I am merely doing what the contract bids me to do."

"Still. It was brave of you to come for me. I... I was terrified. I was terrified no one would come."

Bayard's expression changed in an instant, and concern radiated from his face.

"Miss Delacour," he said softly, "I would venture into the very depths of Hell for you."

Fleur felt her heart beat faster. It was a lie, she knew, for when the year ended and the contract expired, her bodyguard would be gone and with him whatever promises he made to her. Still, the boy's statement calmed her, made her feel better, and the quarter-Veela wondered why.

A moment of silence reigned between the two, a comfortable stillness that Fleur did not want to break.

"How did you know they weren't aurors?" she asked after a while.

"I didn't," Bayard replied cheerfully, his earlier solemnity gone.

"You... didn't?" Fleur repeated incredulously.

"Nope."

"But I remember you saying that auror captains commanded squads, and the fake auror," the quarter-Veela shuddered at the memory of the man clutching her with his wand pressed tight against her neck, "brought only two others with him."

"They do," the boy chuckled, and turned from her to stare at the lake, "But they could have left the rest of the squad at the castle gates. I believe that is the standard procedure of most wizarding ministries when tasked with retrieving important personnel."

Fleur was stunned. Bayard noticed her expression and smiled thinly.

"I'm not omnipotent, Miss Delacour. I didn't know if they were real aurors or not."

"What would have happened if they were real?" she breathed, "Aurors that is."

"Hmm. I supposed I would have embarrassed myself in front of hundreds of students and made a very nasty impression on the employees of the French Ministry."

"How can you say that?" Fleur was amazed at the boy's daring, "How can you face the rest of the school after? Aren't you afraid they will make fun of you?"

"Your safety is paramount, Miss Delacour. If that means I should weather the students's ridicule for the rest of the year, then so be it."

Fleur felt it again. That faint hammering in her heart. She tried to ignore it.

"So... you just guessed?"

"Yup," the boy grinned at her, "We were lucky though. The man was not experienced at bluffing. He was afraid he'd been compromised and made a mess of the situation."

"And what would have happened if he was experienced at bluffing," Fleur asked, a thousand different scenarios playing in her head, all of them ending badly for her.

Bayard laid a gentle hand on her arm, and the quarter-Veela instinctively drew closer to him.

"If you are afraid of what would have happened to you," he spoke quietly, emerald irises peering into her own, "Don't be. I would have come anyways. I am not omnipotent, but I am the best there is."

From any other man, Fleur would have thought he was boasting. But from Bayard, it seemed like the truth, a promise almost, and she let herself be comforted.

"There will be rumors," she stated, blinking at him, "You know that right?"

"Rumors?" the boy seemed unconcerned.

"Yes. Some of the students will think the worst of you, for what you did in the Great Hall."

"I doubt it," Bayard cocked his head to one side, a gesture that Fleur found strangely endearing, "I was fast. Unless said students have unnaturally sharp eyes, they would have saw nothing but me being whisked away by the portkey."

"But that will make the rumors even worse," the quarter-Veela said softly, "I have experienced them before. The mind will make up things in lieu of the facts when there are none," she paused and stared sadly at the boy, "Sometimes, I think imagination is a terrible thing for humans to have."

The boy shrugged, and brushed a hand through his hair.

"The rumors are just that. Rumors. If they cannot hurt you, then there is little I have to fear."

"But they will say that you have done horrendous things to my captors, even though they deserved it. Maybe even killed them. And you will be ignored by the student body. Hated even. They will fear you."

"And do you fear me, Miss Delacour?" the boy regarded her with an innocent smile.

"No," Fleur said stoically, "No. I do not. You are Bayard. My friend. What you did to those... scum... Whatever you did... They didn't deserve anything less. The others may be afraid, but I am not. You had to do what you had to do."

"And what if I told you I did kill them," Bayard stepped forward and Fleur stepped back, automatically, eyes wide, "And what if I told you that not only did I kill them, but I enjoyed killing them. Would you fear me then, Fleur Delacour?"

The quarter-Veela felt her heart pounding. Felt her throat constrict. Felt the fear of staring into a potential killer's face. The boy's smile seemed to grow wider.



"I would..." she began, then amended her statement hastily, "I would be afraid of you, but I also know you wouldn't harm me. Or anyone in the school."

"And you know this because?"

"Because you are Bayard."

The words left her mouth faster than she could think of them. That made her feel very foolish.

"Because I am me," the boy repeated, traced every word so slowly that it made Fleur shiver, "You are more correct than you think, Miss Delacour," he paused, thoughtful, and looked at her again, "Fear is good. Fear is healthy. Fear begets caution and caution begets survival. Always fear, Miss Delacour, but never allow it to claim you."

"I don't fear you," she whispered, "I don't think I ever will."

Bayard just smiled at her, and Fleur knew her hidden meaning had wormed past his guard without acknowledgment.

"But I did feel helpless," she continued, "When they captured me. I felt so alone. So abandoned. I couldn't even do anything."

"It was an unpredictable situation" the boy responded, "I do not think anyone else would have found a way out."

"But you would have," the quarter-Veela challenged.

Emerald eyes regarded her. Then the boy nodded.

"I would have."

"Then teach me."

Her bodyguard froze, then turned.

"I assure you, Miss Delacour, that as long as I am here, you are safe. I have never let a client come to harm, and I won't let you."

"But what if you aren't here? What happens when your contract expires at the end of the year?"

Bayard looked thoughtful.

"I don't ever want to feel that helpless again," Fleur gritted her teeth, "I need to be strong. To protect myself and my family. I need to be like you."

The boy smiled, but Fleur thought she detected a faint glimmer of sorrow lurking beneath.

"You don't want to be like me," he said softly.

There was a hidden meaning behind those words that she couldn't discern. Just like how her's had passed by him. But Fleur pushed on.

"Why not? You are strong. You are powerful. You can do wandless magic. Teach me."

"Strength comes with a price," Bayard replied, "Power even more so. All these things don't come free. And sometimes, the price is something you don't ever want to give up. Sometimes, it may even cost you your humanity."

Fleur swallowed.

"I will do whatever it takes to protect my family."

The boy stared back. He wasn't smiling now.

"How noble," he stated and turned away.

This time the silence was uncomfortable, and Fleur yearned to be away from the stifling stillness. Then the boy turned back, the charming smile back in place, and the quarter-Veela felt her worries drain away.

"I can't teach you everything," Bayard began, "But I can teach you the basics. Meet me here in a week. In the morning," gem-green eyes watched her carefully, "You won't be able to do what I do, but you will last in a fight."

"That's all I want," Fleur said gratefully.

The boy nodded curtly and turned back to staring at the lake. Fleur had the feeling she had been dismissed, but instead of feeling angry, she felt saddened. Like something was missing. The quarter-Veela stepped closer, until her shoulder was nearly touching Bayard's. The sun was still setting, and she watched with the boy as it lowered itself in the distant horizon.

Strangely, it felt right.

## Chapter 8: A Moment of Kindness, A Lifetime of Denial

Morning came, and Fleur Delacour began her hunt for the boy.

It had been an almost instantaneous thing, after yesterday's events, for her mind to link Bayard as a potential mate. She should have seen it coming. The most important quality every Veela searched for in a man, being immune to the allure, had been known to her ever since he appeared at the manor. The following weeks she saw for herself how the boy acted and how he carried himself in public. Fleur had liked what she saw, but she had been hesitant. He was, after all, only a boy.

But last night changed everything. It was not the fact that he saved her life. She would have been grateful, very much so, but that would have been it. No. It was the conversation, when she had poured out her fears to him and he had returned the gesture with sympathy and compassion.

Any sense of him being just a child was gone now. Erased utterly by the events that occurred. He was young, certainly, but the impression she had first received at the manor, when she had first seen the unruly blonde hair and wide, piercing eyes was irrevocably gone.

Fleur stepped lightly into the Great Hall. The chatter dimmed slightly, and Fleur realized that many eyes were on her. She ignored them all. The quarter-Veela made a beeline for the Ravenclaw table, where Bayard was in deep conversation with Aimeric. She slid gracefully into the seat beside him, delighting in his presence. Her bodyguard turned to her and smiled the same smile he always wore when near her.

Fleur swallowed.

Veela were sexual creatures. Passionate and borderline obsessive in behavior to the men they hunted. But unlike Sirens who lured sailors to their deaths with enchanted songs or Succubi who drained the life force from the victims they enthralled, Veela did not hurt their prey. The Veela hunted for mates, bond-partners in a sense, and the act of injuring a potential husband was near sacrilegious to their minds. And also unlike Sirens and Succubi, who bonded, in many cases forcefully, men to their wills, Veela bonded to their mates. It

was a self-sacrificial act, for a Veela when pledging her love to man was in essence giving up her freedom in return for affection. And sometimes, said affection was never returned. The bonding was one way, and though all Veela uniformly possessed otherworldly beauty, there had been instances in the past when a mate would accept the bond, then use the Veela for his own sinister purposes.

It was a horrendous notion, and precisely the reason why the majority of Veela lived in covens. The idea of falling in love with their bonded and then losing their freedom only to be used and discarded was a fear that all Veela held. Indeed, most Veela preferred to abstain the presence of men entirely, and rare were the occasions they were seen by the outside world, be it magical or muggle.

Fortunately for Fleur, her Veela blood was significantly diluted by her mother's marriage to a normal, albeit powerful wizard. There was no chance she would ever experience the bond. Only pure Veela could. But she had inherited the hunting instincts of her ancestry, and it was driving her, for a lack of a better word, barmy.

Fleur felt a physical need to hurt Marietta Edgecombe as she brushed her hand lightly over Bayard's. The boy had only been passing a plate of toast to the pretty Ravenclaw.

The urge both relieved and terrified her.

Her mother had once sat her in her lap at the tender age of nine, and Apolline had carefully explained to her wide-eyed daughter the differences between Veela and normal human girls. It had been an enlightening experience. Humans were fickle. Random. They followed their emotions, allowed feeling to cloud their minds, and thought little of what their actions did to others. This was why human relationships were so very fragile and so commonly broken. Veela were different. They longed for male companionship, mostly of the sexual nature, but they were not promiscuous. Far from it. To a Veela, sex was not just for pleasure. It was an expression of love for their bond-mate, a sign of their devotion, and for a Veela to engage in copulation before the bond solidified was unheard of. It just didn't happen.

It was an irony of the universe, a joke played on the race of man that the most desirable females on the planet were chaste to the point of beyond belief.

But chaste did not mean weak. Apolline had made sure to point that out to her daughter. Veela were a powerful species. They had been hunters once, of both food and mates back when mankind still roamed the world in furs. Back then, they had been enemies, and homo sapiens learned to hide in fear when the winged avians wearing the faces of beautiful women began their night hunt. It was only when man became civilized, that the Veela's instincts became less harmful in nature. But the predatory traits that their ancestors possessed never faded.

Fleur glanced away in frustration as Marietta continued to flirt, if rather unsuccessfully at that, with Bayard.

This was supposed to happen. It was the first phase of the Hunt. Scoping out the prey and its surroundings. Lions did it when they hunted the numerous herbivores of the African Serengeti. Wolves did it when they prowled around potential game. Even bears, hulking, lumbering beasts that they were, scoped out their prey first before going in for the kill. For a Veela, it was nearly the same. But whereas predators sought out the weakness in their prey, Veela sought out the weakness in other predators. Or in other words, girls. To be more specific, human girls. And there certainly were a great many human girls surrounding Bayard.

Fleur grimaced inwardly as she noticed just how much of Hogwarts' female population was staring at her bodyguard. A part of her found the change in her mind disconcerting. A day ago and she would have barely frowned. Now, she was counting heads and wondering what it would take to persuade the girls away from what was rightfully hers. But then again, this was to be expected. The Hunt demanded that she scrutinize her opposition, find out every flaw and fault for her to exploit, and keep them away from a potential mate.

Fleur growled low in her throat. That red-haired female sitting at the Hufflepuff table was literally undressing Bayard with her eyes! And the blonde girl with pigtails beside her was even worse! Fleur was glad then she merely possessed a quarter of her ancestry. A pure Veela would have changed into her avian form and started hurling fireballs by now!

The quarter-Veela turned to her protector. The boy smiled at her. Fleur tried to smile back. She failed miserably. Her cheeks started to

heat up. Her mind began to wander. Her face began to slacken into a dreamy expression. Fleur hastily tore her gaze away. She was Fleur Delacour! Eldest daughter of the French Minister of Magic! Potential Champion of Beauxbatons! Not some love-sick, lust-filled maiden!

"Miss Delacour?" Bayard leaned in closer, worried about her strange behavior, "Are you alright?"

"I am fine," she replied quickly, and her bodyguard nodded slowly, "It iz nothing."

But it was something. It was not love. Not yet at least. But it was something. Something alluring and intoxicating that made her want to bask in the boy's attention.

"Hello Fleur," a soft, polite voice said from beside her.

The quarter-Veela started and turned slowly to see dreamy blue eyes staring at her.

"Hello Luna," she said back in a painful tone.

Of all the girls that surrounded her bodyguard, Luna Lovegood was perhaps the most random. She was an eccentric girl who spoke of things the quarter-Veela had never heard of before. Fleur had known her for only a day, but she had already discerned that the girl was not quite right in the head. The girl had been calling Bayard 'Lord Wrackspurt' for Heaven's Sake! But whereas yesterday's Fleur would have thought her odd and left it at that, this morning's Fleur was evaluating her worth and the threat she presented to her relationship with the boy. It seemed that her predatory instincts refused to allow her even a moment's rest.

"You are not hurt?"

Fleur was surprised at the girl's concern, and slightly touched.

"I am fine," the quarter-Veela said graciously, "Bayard rescued me in ze nick of time."

"That's good," Luna nodded sagely, "Lord Wrackspurt's Wrackspurt told me that the Nargles that stole you were most unsatisfactory to

his taste. He said he wanted a fight, but the Nargles weren't really up to the challenge. I don't know why though. I've always thought Wrackspurts were mischievous but I didn't think they'd hurt people. I was wondering if you knew, since you're a Wrackspurt as well."

Fleur looked nonplussed.

"I am a... what is it you call it... Wrackspurt?"

"Why yes," the little blonde lectured, "You have one on your shoulder."

The quarter-Veela craned her neck and discovered nothing but the unblemished blue of her uniform.

"I do not see anything."

"That's a shame," Luna said sadly, "It seems to be quite taken with you."

Without another word, the girl went back to staring at the ceiling with a lost look in her eyes. Fleur stared at the Ravenclaw in a mixture of curiosity and disbelief. She had a distinct feeling she was missing something important. Like a lost variable in an equation or a vanished syllable in a spell incantation. The quarter-Veela shook her head and allowed her mind to repress the feeling. Surely, whatever it was, it couldn't have come from a girl like Luna?

Rumors. How she hated rumors. It was not the words themselves that she loathed. Definitely not. Those were useful. But the message they conveyed? Those were like a double-edged sword. They could cut you if you weren't careful.

Daphne Greengrass's eyes were narrowed in thought as she sat at the Slytherin table. Yesterday had been interesting to say the least, and she had been working her brain desperately ever since.

The Veela had disappeared when the French auror had grabbed her arm. Kidnappers with hidden portkeys. That much had been clear. It was a logical conclusion, and if anything, Daphne was proud of her cold and calculated logic. But then the boy, Bayard, had done an illogical thing. He had suddenly appeared in front of the last auror, just as the man was about to activate his portkey. Both man and boy



disappeared, wrenched away to whatever destination the portkey was attuned to.

Daphne had scoffed. The boy was dead. She had been certain of that. Stupid, foolish acts like that got you killed. The boy was being a hero. Daphne disliked heroes. Not because they were brave or courageous. No, nothing like that. She disliked heroes because they were so damned illogical. And in real life, they always died in the end. Daphne had mentally derided the boy's fate. Logic and intelligence kept you alive, not stupidity and guts.

But then the boy had done the impossible. He had saved the girl. The Veela had been almost comatose when she appeared, and Daphne had feared the worst for her. Minutes passed by. The Great Hall was in uproar. The aurors that were tasked with guarding the school had been called back in. The students were panicking. The teachers were shouting over the din to be heard.

And then the doors slammed open and every head had swiveled to see two figures standing at the entryway.

The boy had done more than the impossible. He had saved two girls.

Bayard's smile had been insufferable as he supported a black-haired beauty across his shoulder. The woman was wounded and bleeding, but not in a bad way. Madam Pomfrey had bustled over like a mother hen and conjured a stretcher for the witch. The boy had helped levitate the woman on to the stretcher and watched as the nurse walked briskly away towards the infirmary, with the injured witch in tow.

When both women disappeared from view, the boy had turned back to the occupants of the Great Hall, as though if noticing them for the first time. He had smiled a charming smile, and then proceeded to walk back towards the Ravenclaw table, past the Veela who was looking like she had just found the most recent copy of Playwitch, past the giant woman that was the Beauxbatons headmistress who was looking both proud and relieved, past the seats full of students who looked like they had just witnessed the second coming of Merlin. The boy had sat back down in his seat. Smiled at everyone around him. And then promptly began to eat.

Daphne had counted to three.

Chaos erupted. The students began clamoring, demanding to know what happened. The teachers had been forced to shoot sparks into the air, and when that didn't work, create loud bangs with their wands. The aurors had been forced to help, and when calm was restored, a pair had escorted the boy away towards the Headmaster's room.

Through all of it, Daphne had glared at the boy, working her mind on how he had done the impossible. He was untouched. There were no injuries on his body, and no indication he had been in a fight. But there had been at least a dozen kidnappers, if the rumors were to be believed.

Daphne mentally made a face of distaste. On the outside, her features remained impassive, a smooth, aristocratic mask that was the reason for her moniker as the Ice Queen of Slytherin.

Again she was reminded of why she hated rumors. They were utterly illogical, and in most cases, devoid of intelligence. As if to prove her point, Millicent Bulstrode opened her mouth.

"I hear he summoned a vast army of Inferi to battle for her safety."

"Don't be silly Millie," Pansy Parkinson sniffed haughtily from her side of the table, "Only the greatest of dark wizards could do that. Lilith had a much better theory. Isn't that right, Lilith?"

A girl with a hard, angular face nodded.

"It's much more likely he turned into a ferocious but noble animagus form before rescuing the Beauxbatons witch."

Daphne Greengrass fought the urge to roll her eyes. Sometimes, she wondered if this truly was the House of Slytherin. Salazar prized information above all else, and in the great magical wars that brought the four Founders together, his spies had been instrumental in paving the road to victory for wizardkind. But rumors weren't information, and Daphne wondered what the great Slytherin would say if he found out the House he started now consisted of gossips and rumor-mongers.

Daphne shrugged off the thought. As much as Slytherins gossiped, at least they weren't like the Badgers. She could be thankful for that. She had come down from the dorms for breakfast and overheard two Hufflepuffs suggesting the theory that Bayard was actually the Boy-Who-Lived's long lost brother, who had come back to help Potter in his time of need. A preposterous notion.

Daphne turned her attention back to the Ravenclaw table, or more specifically, the Veela. The girl was gorgeous. In an innocent, almost angelic way. Daphne could see why someone would risk their life to save her. She was the picture-perfect of the fairytale princess, rescued by her prince charming from the jaws of some terrible monster. But the Slytherin did not mind that. Was not jealous of the witch's unnatural beauty, unlike so many others. The world was not perfect. This she knew. It did not conform around the plot of a daydreaming author, did not revolve around the princess and her future beloved. The world was a cruel, random place. Sometimes even cruel and random together. For example, an enchanting witch, both beautiful and deadly, could come between the princess and her knight, could entwine the hero in a delectable web of seduction, and ensnare him into her arms.

While Daphne wasn't this witch, she certainly had no qualms about being her either.

Daphne grimaced as Malfoy began winding up his usual diatribe regarding Potter and Weasley, interrupting her thoughts in the process. If there was anything worse than rumors, it was one of Malfoy's long, pointless rants. Beside her, Blaise Zabini nodded his head in concurrence with Draco's tirade, but the boy's eyes betrayed his annoyance. Malfoy's influence was not as strong as he believed. He certainly held sway over the children of Death Eater families, but the House of Slytherin had many students, some of them muggleborn, and whilst they publically stood behind the scion of Malfoy, Daphne knew their true opinions regarding the little git. And it was less than stellar.

For that was what Malfoy was. A pretentious, sniveling little git, so enamored with his family's fame that he couldn't see straight. He was no better than the Gryffindors he so hated. Even worse in some respects. At least Potter kept the fame to himself.

It shamed Daphne that a few years ago, she had liked Draco.

He had been so prim and proper with an encyclopedia's worth of knowledge regarding pureblooded traditions, and to an eleven-year old girl's naïve mind that made him the perfect gentleman. Daphne had been part of their little gang, and though never participated in their bullying antics, had supported them secretly.

Things changed during Second Year, when she overheard Malfoy discussing the Chamber of Secrets with his henchmen. The casual way that Draco had disregarded muggleborns and even suggested that the beast kill them had made Daphne's blood run cold. More than that, it made Daphne think, made her use her mind. And her mind warned her of being involved with the Heir of Malfoy. So she had distanced herself from Draco and his gang. Soon she saw the ugly truth that her childish adoration had hidden from her for so long.

Daphne Greengrass the spoiled little girl with delusions of grandeur had died that year. Replaced by Daphne Greengrass, the ruthlessly logical Ice Queen of Slytherin. In some ways Daphne missed those years of innocence. When she believed everything Draco had told her about purebloods and muggleborns. But pureblooded superiority was a myth. A lie in the face of the truth.

Daphne blinked away the memories. Malfoy's rant was coming to a close, thank Merlin for that. The Slytherin turned back to watching the boy at the Ravenclaw table. She would crack the rumors that surrounded him, if not for her logic then for herself. He was, after all, a much more attractive alternative to Draco's buffoonish attempts to look superior.

Luna was skipping down the deserted corridors. It was a light-hearted activity, if somewhat juvenile, but that suited the blonde witch just fine. Of course, skipping also was a lot faster than walking, which meant Luna collided quite forcefully with the boy when she rounded the corner. Enough to send the young wizard on his bottom.

Green eyes stared back at her from the floor.

"I much preferred it when we met earlier," the boy said dryly, and then rubbed his head, "It didn't hurt nearly as much then."

You mean it didn't hurt at all. The shadows behind him suggested.

"Indeed."

Luna hurriedly curtsied.

"I really am sorry," she apologized, "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"That much is clear," the boy remarked as he picked himself back up, "Hello Luna."

"Hello Lord Wrackspurt," Luna beamed back.

"Strange time to be up," he commented.

"Oh I'm trying to find clues about the Rotfang Conspiracy," she smiled, "They only show up at night. The clues that is. They all disappear in the morning because that's when everybody is awake. I'm sure the Rotfangs are using the night as cover to spread gum disease. Brushing your teeth can only do so much, you know."

If she was expecting the boy to answer, she would be disappointed. He was staring at her feet. Luna didn't know why. She certainly liked her feet and would be quite peeved if someone ran off with them. Maybe the boy was one of those feet-people she kept hearing about back in her dorms.

"What happened to your shoes?" the boy asked, breaking the silence.

Luna looked down in confusion. Her bare feet greeted her gaze, and the Ravenclaw wiggled her toes in response.

"Nargles I'm afraid," she replied dreamily, and tuned her attention back to the boy "It would appear that my repelling charms weren't very effective. But that's to be expected of course. The Nargles come back every year."

Just like last time, something flashed in the boy's eyes, a glimmer of emotion that Luna found to be fascinating.

This is why you should never have children, my lord. Hate's familiar voice rasped in her mind. Forget whatever atrocities adults

participate in, whatever crimes they may commit, for they all pale in comparison to the wanton cruelty of youth.

"I'll keep that in mind, Hate," the boy replied, sounding amused, but looking very less so.

Luna was horrified. She had forgotten to say hello to the Wrackspurt!

"Hello Mr. Wrackspurt," she amended hastily, inclining her head towards the shadowy mass.

Greetings Moon Child.

Luna's eyebrows quirked into an expression of curiosity. The boy saw, and shook his head gently.

"Forgive Hate. He likes to make things unnecessarily complicated."

"That's alright," she chirped, "I don't mind it. It's a much better sounding name than Looney."

The boy's jaws clenched. Luna figured the Wrackspurt must be bothering him. A second later the deep, metallic voice entered her mind again.

What did I tell you, my lord? It is children who possess the most cruelty in this universe. They are spiteful, devious little things. Full of mindless malice and filled with bitter jealousy. Better to cull them all in blood and fire.

"You forget," the boy said mildly, "That I was once too a child."

Ahhh. But you were different. So very different. You hated the right things. Loathed the right people. But never once did you allow your malice to cloud your mind. Never once have you erred because of something so simple as envy. You hate with purpose, my lord. And there is nothing more terrifying in this world than a man whose hate gives him purpose.

Through all of the shadow's diatribe the boy stood still, features an expressionless mask. Luna decided he needed some cheering up.

"I don't think you're terrifying," she said seriously.

The boy smiled thinly.

"That is good to know."

A moment of silence passed. Well. It was a moment of silence for the boy. Luna was humming. Her father had taught her the little ditty last year. It was supposed to attract Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.

"You aren't cold?" the boy asked after a while. He gestured to her bare feet, "The halls are paved with stone. And stone is not exactly the best at keeping in warmth."

Luna realized he was right. It was getting a little chilly. But she delighted in the feel of cool stone on her feet. It was such a pleasant difference from the stuffy heat that both shoes and socks afforded.

"I'm perfectly fine, Lord Wrackspurt," she replied truthfully, "I like the feeling."

"Nevertheless..." the boy paused, as though in deep thought. His wand abruptly appeared in his hand, and he pointed it in a random direction.

"Accio."

If Luna was Hermione Granger then she would have noticed that the boy didn't add the name of the object he wanted to summon after the incantation. If Luna was Hermione Granger, then she would have further noted that the boy hadn't performed the necessary wand movements for the Summoning Charm to work. If Luna was Hermione Granger she would have scoffed at the boy's seemingly sloppiness at magic and hastened to correct him. Finally, if Luna was Hermione Granger she would have cried out loud in surprise when a pair of shoes sped down the hall and zoomed towards the boy.

Luna wasn't Hermione Granger though, and merely continued humming as the sneakers slowed to a stop. The boy stared at the shoes, then stared at her, and then went back to glaring at the shoes.

"Does this happen often?" he asked softly, and pointed to the giant letters that proclaimed 'LOONEY' inscribed on the white fabric.

"Nargles are persistent creatures, Lord Wrackspurt," Luna responded gravely, "They're also very possessive of the things they steal. It's why I've never had the thought of getting my things back," she leaned in closer and whispered in a conspiring tone, "I think it's because Nargles are cold-blooded. Like reptiles. That's why they keep all the clothing. To wear them on cold days."

Your words are closer to the truth than you realize, Moon Child.

Luna blinked and then smiled. It was not often you were complimented by a Wrackspurt!

The boy, however, shared none of her enthusiasm. His face was blank, but Luna could see flashes of anger rippling underneath the cool exterior.

My lord. Hate's words sounded like an admonishment.

"Silence Hate," the boy's voice was soft and lethal. The shadows swirled and churned, but they obeyed. The wand rose again, and the incantation came from the boy's lips.

"Accio."

This time, more than just shoes came. Dresses, sweaters, socks, blouses and everything in between. All of them had been damaged in some way. A sky-blue blouse had been stained brown with mud. A pair of socks sported jagged holes. A bright, sun-colored dress looked like it had been splotted by different shades of paint. The dress halted jerkily before Luna and she hesitantly reached out and touched it. It had been the last thing her mother had given her. It was, used to be, her favorite dress.

The Ravenclaw smiled dazzlingly and held up the piece for the boy to see.

"Thank you Lord Wrackspurt," she said happily, "I've been looking for this forever. I didn't think I'd ever see it again. Not since the Nargles stole it from me during my first year. But that's okay. I



forgive them. They made my dress even prettier. I like the different colors they came up with."

The boy said nothing. Emerald eyes stared daggers through her. Piercing. Searching. Then the boy spoke.

"Hate."

Understood, my lord.

Luna watched, captivated, as a single, shadowy tendril rose from the dark mass that surrounded the boy. It was no more than a sliver, the width of her pinky, but much, much longer. It slithered forward, wrapped around her leg like a snake, and coiled upwards until it surrounded her entire body. Luna giggled. It tickled. The Ravenclaw swiveled her head to see the tendril's head settle on her shoulder. It was almost cute. In a dark, eerie way.

"If you find yourself... troubled," the boy continued to stare at her, "I will know. Hate will know. And that will be enough."

Luna nodded, then patted the snake-thing on her shoulder.

"It's not a Lemon-Colored Hrumfferr is it?"

"A Lemon-Colored what?" the boy's death stare had not faded, but he sounded bemused.

"A Lemon-Colored Hrumfferr. They're nasty little things. They dig under your skin and turns it yellow. Soon, you'll be yellow all over, and you'll start thinking you're a giant lemon."

The day I turn into a giant piece of fruit is the day Merlin rises from his grave and starts dancing in his underpants.

Luna was pleasantly surprised. Not only did the shadows behind the boy say the words, but the tendril wrapped around her seemed to be speaking as well. The Ravenclaw pondered the implications. It came to her at once, and she smiled at the boy.

"Thank you Lord Wrackspurt," she curtsied, "For bequeathing to me this title."

"Title?" the boy looked confused, "What title?"

"I am now Lady Wrackspurt," Luna replied proudly.

"Lady... Wrackspurt..." the boy stared at her like she had grown two heads.

"Why yes. You had a Wrackspurt, and the Wrackspurt called you 'lord', so you are 'Lord Wrackspurt'. But now, you gave me a part of your Wrackspurt so that makes me 'Lady Wrackspurt'."

The boy's face hid his laughter, but his eyes gave them away. They were dancing with amusement.

Even you must admit, my lord, that is impeccable logic. Both Hate and the snake thing drawled into her ear.

Luna nodded and held out her hand. The boy looked at it and raised a single brow.

"I am now Lady Wrackspurt," the Ravenclaw half-explained, half-scooled, "You have to kiss my hand since you are Lord Wrackspurt."

The boy chuckled and then bowed regally. He swept her hand in his own and then allowed his lips to brush her knuckles. Luna felt a strange tingle spread throughout her body.

She rather liked the feeling.

I watch the strange blonde skip away, clutching a single dress from the massive assortment that litter the ground. A wave of my hand gathers the clothing into a pile. Another wave deposits them into a conjured trunk that I banish back into my room in the Beauxbatons carriage. Perhaps the girl will want them later.

"Feeling compassionate are we?" Hate's voice is a low, rasping drawl.

"What?"

"You feel for them, do you not?"

The words surprise me. My face masks it rather well.

"Clarify the question, Hate," I turn to my companion, "You are not making any sense."

The knight materializes, its body trailing black smoke.

"You hold affection for them. For the one who can see me and the one who we are to protect. You like them."

"Lies."

Hate laughs. A discordant sound that I have long learned to ignore.

"The affection is there, my lord. It lingers in your heart. Coiled in a thin strand. Barely a glimmer. But it is there. Waiting for its time to strike."

"Lies," I say again, "You know nothing of how I feel."

"I am you," the knight growls softly, "I am your Hate made manifest. Your Loathing forged through shadow and blood. Your Revulsion crafted in the fires of war. I am you, my lord, and believe me when I say that I can feel what you feel, love what you love, and hate what you hate. And what I am telling you now is that you feel for those two."

"You have no proof," is what I say back.

"There is plenty of proof, my lord, but you delude yourself in thinking otherwise."

"Is there now? Enlighten me then."

The knight turns to me, its eyes glowing like green lanterns.

"The Veela. You comforted her in her time of need. Made her feel better. That is most unlike you."

"Our contract works better if she thinks I care."

"Yes, but you have never committed yourself so fully in someone else's emotion. Was it really a ploy, my lord, to make her trust you? Or was it something else? Something more... human?"

I stay silent this time. The knight continues on mercilessly.

"And now the Moon Child. How simple it would have been to merely ignore her. Or even give her just a single word of comfort. But instead, you summoned every article of clothing she has lost and even more disbelievingly, allow her a portion of the Shadow."

"It was just a small portion," I know the argument is weak, but I try it anyways.

"The Shadow is infinite my lord," Hate rasps softly, "But it is not the size that matters. It is the intent. And your intent shows that even though you may not care for either of them, you still feel."

I say nothing.

"It is alright you know," the knight stares at me with something akin to sympathy, "To feel. You are still human. It is natural for you, and I do not think any less of you for it."

"You are passionate about this subject, Hate," I try to change the topic.

The knight's laughter turns dark.

"My lord. I have watched you grow and prosper ever since the day you called for me. I have seen you take lives with your very own hands. I have seen you do things that should not have been possible by mortal standards. You are what I have always envisioned you to be. Yet, you are also what I hope you will never become."

"Spare me your pity," my voice becomes cold as distant memories surface, "You know what I think about the matter."

"Yes, my lord. And I think you are wrong."

"Wrong?" I hiss, and the coldness disappears, replaced by fire, "Is it wrong for me to shield myself from further betrayals? Is it wrong for me to prevent anyone from hurting me ever again? Is it wrong for

me to distance myself from these cruelties? Watch yourself Hate. You are treading on dangerous grounds."

"It is not wrong for you to protect yourself," the knight replies, "But it is wrong for you to bottle all your emotions inside. I can feel them surging beneath. Like a restless wave. Eager to be freed."

"I have no emotions left," I whisper. The fire is gone. As swiftly as it appeared.

"All humans have emotion, my lord," Hate's eyes burn with conviction, "It is the folly of your race and the bane of your kind. But it is also useful. Invaluable, even, for this universe to work."

I chuckle darkly at the irony.

"I thought I was a monster in your eyes, Hate."

I feel him smile behind his visor.

"Even monsters have a human side to them, my lord."

## Chapter 9: Training

Inase Takahashi was in a foul mood as she stepped onto the Hogwarts grounds. A week she had been in that Pomfrey woman's care and the witch could do nothing as the nurse administered potion after potion to her protesting body. To say they tasted bad would be a misnomer. "Bad" wasn't something you could use to describe such vulgar fluids. Inase's choice of words included a long string of profanities in Japanese, and some in English. The Asian witch shuddered. The only one that had not made her want to retch immediately after administration was one that tasted like cement. And she didn't even know what cement tasted like for Merlin's sake!

Further souring her mood was Templar. Today would mark the day her tutelage under him would begin, and that caused her no small amount of trepidation as well as shame. She was twenty-two, a full grown woman, and here she was about to be instructed by a boy no older than fourteen. A trained warrior of the Tempest Moon Clan, bowing before a teenager? It was a laughable notion, and had she not seen for herself what the boy was capable of, she would have scoffed herself.

Her pride was solely wounded, but then again was it not pride, blind, arrogant pride that had led her here in the first place? Nevertheless, it galled her, vexed her to no end that her future lay in the hands of a boy.

Inase strode past the Beauxbatons carriage, where Templar had told her to meet. She stopped, and stared. All thoughts of doubt flew from her mind as her eyes drank in the scene.

The knight and the boy were dueling.

Two blades flashed in the morning light, silver blurs dancing in a lethal symphony. Hate's double-edged broadsword swept in great disemboweling strokes that left the air whistling in its destructive wake. Templar's blade, a thinner, smaller version of the knight's wove in intricate patterns that were almost too fast to see. The two weapons clashed against one another to the tune of ringing steel, smote each other in powerful, yet graceful blows, and seemed to create lasting ripples in the dawn mist.

Inase swallowed. She had dueled with blades before, back in her village, against fellow students and under her teacher's instruction. She had been the best. Her form was flawless. Her bladework even more so. Inase had thought she had seen everything when it came to swordplay. She was wrong.

The knight swung hard and his blade cleaved down to split the boy in two. Inase would have rolled away or in the worst case scenario, lifted her sword to block. Templar did neither. The boy sidestepped, moved ever-so-slightly to the left so that the sword passed bare millimeters from his face. His own blade came up, and met the knight's massive weapon. But it was not a block or a parry. Templar moved his blade at an angle, so when both swords collided, his slid. The faint screech of metal skidding over metal entered her ears, and Inase watched, stunned as the boy used his own momentum to propel his sword along the keen edge of the knight's weapon. It was a beautifully thought out maneuver. Hate was going to have to either lose the grip on his blade or his fingers.

The knight laughed and tossed his sword into the air, breaking the connection. It flipped end over end before descending, and Hate caught it in his left hand before sweeping it back towards the boy. Templar's motion had carried him past the knight, and the massive black sword fell towards his unguarded back. The boy stooped, as though if picking something up from the ground, and his blade appeared suddenly over his shoulder, angled a perfect forty-five degrees. Again the hiss of steel grating against steel was heard, and Hate's broadsword slid upwards, harmlessly past Templar's head, and into the air.

Inase felt overwhelmed. What she was witnessing here was no simple duel. It was no mock match where the winner was the one that scored the most points. There was no resting between bouts, no breaks in between flurries of strikes. This was nonstop combat. Continuous, uninterrupted battle. No hesitation. No pause. War in its most primal sense, where man matched his strength against a monster's. Every hissing stroke from Hate's immense weapon was aimed to kill. Every blistering riposte from the boy was deemed to slay. This was swordsmanship as it was meant to be, and Inase felt utterly overcome by it.

It took a while, but Inase realized that the two weren't using any forms or stances she knew of. The Europeans were not as rigid as

their Oriental counterparts when it came to the art of the blade, but there were steps even they learned before delving into combat. Hate and Templar were different. Their movements were completely random. Sometimes the boy would launch into elegant maneuvers that bordered close to dancing before abruptly changing to brutal hacking motions. The knight would occasionally flick its blade in vast, sweeping arcs before shortening its grip to become a ruthless, clubbing machine. The two changed at a thought, smashed into one another with their swords before changing into light fencing and then fell back to cruel, merciless strokes once more.

If anything, Inase was skilled at observation when she put her mind to it, and it was not long after that she discovered that whilst the two used no named forms, they certainly had their own styles. Hate's was sheer, brutish force. The knight put its entire strength behind each blow, raw, unholy strength feeding its furious strokes. Inase's limbs shuddered slightly as they remembered being the recipient of its brutal attacks. And then there was the boy. If Hate could be likened to a powerhouse of strength, then Templar was pure economy of motion. Every strike he made was surgical, every blow he returned clinical. He moved in sure, confident strides, turned the barest of distances so that the knight's descending strokes passed a hairbreadth's away from his body, positioned his blade at perfect angles so that Hate's weapon slid against his own and away.

It all made Inase feel inferior.

It was bound to happen. For one of the two to be injured. Inase was surprised it was the knight.

Hate overextended. Its massive broadsword clove down, and the boy sidestepped neatly. The blade smashed into the earth, and sank into the dirt. Templar's smile, which had remained on his face throughout the duel, turned terrifying. The boy planted a foot on the trapped blade, used it as leverage, and sprang for the knight. His grip on his own sword became double-handed, and he brought it high for an overhead strike.

The knight realized its predicament, laughed, and before the blade could come crashing down upon its crown, raised his free arm to block. There, blackness coalesced, becoming solid, tangible, forming into the rigid surface of an enormous kite shield. Templar's sword bounced off with a metallic clang.



The boy did not seem to notice. He was still in the middle of his leap. Fast as a cat, swifter than a striking serpent, Templar reached out and grasped one of the horns that adorned the knight's skull. Momentum was on his side, and Inase watched, amazed, as the boy swung himself past Hate's immense shoulders. The hand that was used swiftly attached itself back to the sword hilt, and the boy launched a heavy blow towards the knight.

Hate had managed to twist its body halfway, sword still buried into the earth, before the boy's blade swept through its neck.

Templar landed lightly, with a grace that had come from years of practice, and spun around, sword out and ready to defend.

He needn't have bothered.

The knight's head lolled back, rolled from its shoulders, and fell with a meaty thud on the ground. Its body teetered unsteadily, swayed in an almost drunken manner. A shadowy mist seemed to dissipate from the neck, and Inase stifled a gasp. The boy had just killed his companion.

Her theory was shattered when a steely voice came from the ground.

"Very good my lord," Hate's ironclad visage spoke to the boy from its position on the floor, "You have not managed such a lethal strike for a long while."

Inase watched in shock as the knight's headless body bent down and collected the horned helm, all former traces of wavering now gone. She could see the cruel, sneering faceplate and the hellish fire that was the thing's eyes. They hadn't dimmed a bit.

"First blood to me," the boy said rather unnecessarily.

That was significantly more than first blood, thought Inase faintly.

"First blood always goes to you my lord," the knight's drawled slowly, seemingly uncaring of the fact that it now held its own head in its hands, "But remember it is I who always win in the end."

Plated arms rose, and along with it, the cruel helm. Armored digits held the knight's head in place, just above the barren neck. Something shot out from the stump, segmented and gleaming like ivory. It took a moment for Inase to realize it was the thing's spine. Like a spear, the glossy white bone thrust upwards, and impaled itself into the bottom of Hate's helm. For a second, the knight looked like a macabre giraffe, with an elongated neck of vertebrae that twisted in place in some sort of gruesome dance. Ever so slowly, the spine receded, and the knight's head steadily lowered until it was snugly fit back onto its shoulders.

Hate cracked its neck, and the ugly sounds of rearranging bone drifted unwelcomingly into Inase's ears.

The witch felt like she was going to be sick.

"We have a visitor," the knight said, its fiery eyes flickering towards her.

Templar turned around, saw her, and gave a cheery wave, as though if decapitating a seven-foot tall armored monster and then watching it stick its head back onto its shoulders was a common, everyday occurrence.

The witch walked unsteadily towards the two, her hand clutched protectively over the sheathe that housed her katana. She stopped in front of the boy, and began to kneel.

"Now there's no need for that," Templar said amicably, a bright smile painted on his features, "You swore no oath of fealty to me. There is no need to kneel."

"You are my master," she returned slowly, hesitantly, "It is a sign of respect for me to do so."

The boy shrugged and looked mildly embarrassed.

"Well get up then. Can't learn from me in that position."

Inase stood up, apprehension visible on her countenance.

"I will be your spellwork instructor," the boy tapped a finger against his chest, "A dueling teacher if you will. Though there really won't be

any new spells for me to teach you. It's more of the practical thing, if you know what I mean."

She had no idea what he meant.

"Since you are somewhat skilled with a sword," Templar continued, "you will need someone who can gauge your abilities and improve them. Hate will do that for you."

Inase had a sudden feeling of imminent doom descending on her shoulders. The knight seemed to notice this, which wasn't hard, considering the look of horror on her face.

"It will be a... pleasure," it leered at her.

"You will be expected of course," the boy smiled, "to last against the both of us, when Hate is done with you."

"Last? Against the two of you?" Inase came close to choking on the words, "After what I've just seen?"

The boy raised a single eyebrow.

"You are referring to what happened to Hate?"

The witch nodded. The knight chuckled from behind her.

"Ah, well. Do not be worried," Templar said good-naturedly, "I am sure that with plenty of glue and a touch of spit, your head will attach itself back just as well as Hate's."

Inase knew it was a joke. It had to be a joke. But the way the boy said it, and the way the knight was pawing at its sword hilt, she had a sinking feeling what the boy said was more than just a simple joke.

The apprehension grew inside of her, but all the boy and the knight were doing was just standing there. She swallowed before opening her mouth.

"So what happens now?"

Templar looked at her.

"The spellwork."

"Then why aren't we starting?"

Hate laughed before vanishing, sword and all. The boy smiled.

"Because we are waiting for one more."

Fleur had told herself it wasn't a date. Had ingrained it in her head that all Bayard was going to do was show her how to defend herself. There wasn't going to be a slow, leisurely walk around the school grounds, discussing defense theory. There wasn't going to be a picnic where both she and the boy sat on the field and went over the practical uses of spells while gazing deep in each other's eyes. It was strictly professional, what was going to happen today, and Fleur had made sure to drill that into her mind.

Which is of course why she had spent thirty minutes in front of the mirror getting ready.

The quarter-Veela huffed to herself as she walked into the carriage's commons. It was a magically enlarged place, with sets of comfy sofas for lounging and round, lavishly adorned tables for studying. It had no fireplace. Unlike the British, whose idea of warmth involved a gigantic chimney that was fed daily by house elves, the French were above such crude implements. The Beauxbatons carriage was heated by a complicated set of warming charms that measured the temperature outside and compensated the difference via hot wind. Constant, warm breezes were blown throughout the carriage, not enough for the students to notice while in their rooms, but certainly enough to keep the temperature always at a certain degree. Fleur wondered briefly if the Durmstrang ship that was anchored in the Hogwarts lake possessed the same warming charms.

Fleur took a look around. The commons was thankfully empty. If the quarter-Veela was lying to herself, she would have said she had gone to bed earlier than usual last night, and set an alarm to wake herself this morning. That was the prim and proper explanation she was prepared to give for anyone awake at this ungodly hour. The truth of the matter was that she had tossed and turned on her bed the entire night, all the time willing the minutes to pass faster. She had been anticipating this for all week, and though it was only

lessons on defense, she was looking forward to spending time with Bayard, alone.

The past couple of days had played hell on her mind. The rumors had been more beneficial to the boy than harmful, and the rounds around the school had painted Bayard as a shining knight of virtue that had rescued a maiden in distress. Which of course, he was. But he was her knight, and no one else's. Her Veela instincts had been raging as girls from all different houses came over to fawn over his bravery. And that was only in the mornings, at the Ravenclaw table. Fleur shuddered to think of the amount of attention he was getting in the hallways and classrooms. The only good that came out of this was that the rumors had also painted him as somewhat intimidating, and since Bayard constantly sat next to or was close to her, no other boys had been forthcoming to try to woo her.

Fleur pulled back a strand of loose hair. She had foregone for today the usual light blue uniform all Beauxbatons students wore. Combat robes, used for dueling, were clad over her lithe frame. They were tighter than normal clothes, and that suited her just fine as it allowed Bayard a glimpse of the attractive figure underneath.

She exited the carriage, and made sure to shut the embellished door as silently as possible. It would not do for her morning tryst to be discovered so close to succeeding, after all.

The morning air was refreshing as it was cold, and the quarter-Veela shivered slightly. Good as dueling robes were for showing the figure, they failed quite hard at containing warmth.

The grass clung to her shoes as she meandered slowly towards her bodyguard's chosen spot. She was early, and she took the time to enjoy the feeling of fresh wind blowing into her face. Besides, it would not do to rush to meet the boy. Her father had come from an ancient, pureblooded family, and though Sebastian abhorred the views adopted by the supremacists, he still had made sure his daughters understood the tradition that came from being in his household. Manners and etiquette was something Sebastian held to the highest regard, and something he expected from both his eldest and youngest. Fleur was the daughter of a lord of a noble house, and thus, she was expected to act the part. It would not do to simply leap and bound towards her the boy calling his name all the way. She had to act solemnly. Lady-like.

Her thoughts regarding customs were driven to the back of her mind when she finally caught sight of Bayard.

Like her, the boy wasn't wearing his uniform. But unlike her, his choice of attire was not wizardly. He had gone "Muggle", for the lack of a better term.

Black pants and a black shirt hid his body from view, but Fleur did get a good look at his bare arms. They were lean and hard, devoid of the faintest traces of fat. But unlike bodybuilders, whose muscles bulged outwards and were rather unseemly in the quarter-Veela's opinion, her bodyguard's musculature was more akin to a dancer's or a swimmer's. Strong, but not overly so.

Taut, but not too tight. Fleur thought she could see scar tissue across both arms. But that did not take away from the boy's image. Indeed, it added to it. Bayard possessed the body of a warrior, of a soldier, and that made him all the more alluring.

The smile that had crept onto her face suddenly faltered.

The boy was talking to someone. More importantly, that someone was female. A black-haired witch. With porcelain features and dark-colored eyes.

The smile disappeared completely. Replaced by an expression of utmost fury.

Fleur stomped towards her bodyguard, her Veela aura flaring with barely-contained ire.

"Why iz she here!" Fleur spat in English as she approached, to make sure the woman understood.

"I have agreed to teach Lotus some tricks of the trade," Bayard replied evenly, and Fleur had to give him credit for not flinching. Veela were beautiful when content. They were terrifying when angry, "And in return for my instruction she will help guard you."

"Guard me?" Fleur cried out, incredulous, "She waz part of ze group zat kidnapped me!"

"Fleur..." the quarter-Veela growled low in her throat as the Oriental witch spoke, "... Miss Delacour, I understand your reservations on me being here," Lotus looked highly uncomfortable, and Fleur exulted in her discomfort, "But believe me when I say that I had no idea what those men were going to do to you when I signed the contract. If I knew, then I wouldn't have signed, let alone participate in the job."

"And you expect me to believe zat?" Fleur snarled, her eyes alight with anger, "You were there with zhem! You were there when zhey were going to..." she swallowed, "When zhey were going to break me."

"Miss Delacour..."

"You didn't even do anyzing to help!"

"I had no choice in the matter!" Lotus cried out, half in frustration and half in regret, "I was under the impression I had to complete the contract or else my magic would be lost! The others tricked me! They told me that the agreement I signed was bound by a magical oath! I was afraid to lose my magic!"

"Zhen you should have lost your magic rather zhan help with zuch a deplorable act!"

Fleur glared at the witch, daring her to refute her words. To the quarter-Veela's surprise, the woman looked down, and said nothing.

"If it helps any," Bayard remarked dryly, and Fleur turned to look at him, "I made sure to reinforce the fact that she was being very stupid on our way back to Hogwarts."

The quarter-Veela ignored the comment. Instead she turned her feelings of anger and betrayal on the boy.

"How could you Bayard! How could you trust her after what happened? She iz deceiving you! I know it! Aren't you afraid she will betray you?"

The boy leveled a neutral stare back at her.

"I am not," he said quietly, "Because if she does I will kill her."

Fleur's mouth snapped shut in surprise. Lotus cringed visibly. Bayard noticed both and chuckled mirthlessly.

"If you think that I am blindly entrusting her with your safety, Miss Delacour, then you are woefully mistaken," the boy smiled thinly, "My honor may prevent me from killing women or children, but that does not apply to those who betray me. Lotus knows better than to cross me."

Bayard glanced at the woman in question before continuing.

"This game we are playing is a dangerous one, with you being the prize. Your father was well aware of it. Hence the reason he hired me. However, while I may be skilled, I am still only one person. There will be times I am not near you that our enemies will choose to strike. Lotus can be an extra pair of eyes as well as an added line of defense to deny those who would wish you ill."

"But you said that you were the best of the best," Fleur pointed out, desperate to drive the woman away, "You don't need her help!"

"I am the best of the best," Bayard confirmed, "But Lotus is added insurance. An advantage that we would be fools not to take."

"I don't trust her," the quarter-Veela crossed her arms, "I won't trust her."

"Trust is not necessary for the two of you to work together," the boy smoothly returned.

"I can make a magical oath," Lotus offered quietly, "To make sure I won't ever harm Miss Delacour."

Fleur was tempted to take the offer. She never got the chance. Bayard shot Lotus a glare so cold that it made the woman stumble back in surprise.

"You are too quick to give up your independence," the boy said simply, "Even if it is for honor's sake."

The witch winced and looked away. Fleur had the feeling that she was being left out of something important. She wanted to ask, but



the same feeling returned and told her neither of the two would give her the answers she wanted.

"Do you trust me, Miss Delacour?" Bayard asked suddenly.

"Of course I do," she snapped, a little miffed that the boy could think otherwise.

"Then why won't you trust me now when I say Lotus means you no harm?"

"But she did mean me harm! She waz with ze men who kidnapped me!"

"If she truly wished to hurt you, Miss Delacour, then I would not have brought her back to the school with me."

Fleur fumed. Bayard was not budging on the issue.

"If you inzist on her being here," the quarter-Veela grounded out, "I will not fight your decision. But I ztill disagree with it."

"Excellent," the smile on her bodyguard's face seemed to brighten exponentially, and Fleur felt a hot flush creeping along her neck, "We can begin immediately then."

Bayard stared at the two expectantly.

"Come on," the boy gestured, "Show me what you've got."

Fleur looked hesitantly at her wand. It was Lotus that asked the question for the both of them.

"How do you want us to start?"

"How you would usually begin a duel," Bayard replied, "Think if you were in a fight. What would be the first step you would take?"

Fleur immediately casted a Protego, and felt her heart swell with pride as a dome of protective magics shimmered into existence before her. Her interest was never in dueling, but as the child of a patrician family, the art of sparring with magic was imprinted on her anyway. The Delacours had a wealthy history of producing fine

duelists, and Sebastian had made sure that his daughters were well-taught if not well-motivated. Fleur's teacher had been a crusty old wizard whose temperament had forever bordered between nasty and downright hostile. But he had been effective, and the quarter-Veela could count on many spells and curses to use in her repertoire.

Beside her, Lotus produced a Protego with a wave of her wand, and Fleur tried hard not to feel delighted when the shield looked slightly less coherent than her own. In the back of her mind, the quarter-Veela knew she was being childish and even vindictive to the Asian witch. It was partly because of her involvement with the men who had snatched her, but also something else. The woman was beautiful. The woman was and would be consistently close to Bayard. That made her a threat. Her Veela instincts compelled her to neutralize said threat, through competition. Fleur desperately wanted to prove to the boy that she was better looking, a better student, better everything than the woman beside her.

If Bayard was impressed, he certainly didn't show it. The boy frowned, ever so slightly, and Fleur wondered if she had done something wrong.

Just as she was about to go over a mental summary of the Shield Charm, Bayard flicked his wand in their direction.

Lotus cried out in surprise as her magical shield shattered. The woman stepped back, disoriented, and then fell, her arms and legs snapping together in rigid fashion, victim to the boy's Petrificus Totalus.

Fleur had no time to marvel her bodyguard's speed or even time to gloat over Lotus's undignified defeat. The boy's wand turned to her, and Fleur felt a sudden fear welling up from inside her. Her conjured Protego glowed an alarming shade of red, the only warning she got, before Bayard's spell hit her with all its destructive force.

The Shield Charm was designed to deflect if not absorb all spells, with some notable exceptions such as the Killing Curse. Of course, the power of the Protego relied in the magical strength of its user. Powerful wizards like Sebastian were near impervious while the shimmering barrier was in front of them. Average wizards produced Protegos that were less tangible, less coherent and thus less

capable of protecting their users. Fleur's shield had been almost perfect in shape and consistency, a testament to her above average magical prowess and the long hours she had been forced to spend with her draconian dueling instructor.

All of that didn't matter. The boy's spell, curse, whatever it was, blasted against her shield with all the finesse of a charging bull in a china shop. Fleur felt for the briefest of seconds, the morbid sensation of being crushed by a massive, squeezing force before her Protego collapsed in an almighty rush of magical energies. The gleaming barrier exploded, outwards and away, turned into a thousand unsalvageable pieces, and then dissipated into the morning air. The magical backlash was immense, and the quarter-Veela felt a searing pain stabbing into her mind.

"Petrificus Totalus," Bayard said, and Fleur quickly joined Lotus on the wet grass, stiff as a board.

"Congratulations, both of you," the boy walked towards the two petrified women, "If this had been real combat, real fighting, the two of you would be dead, and I would have emerged unscathed."

Bayard stopped when he was between their bodies, and the quarter-Veela had to crane her neck to see him. The smile was still on his face, as it always was, but the voice grown stern.

"Lesson Number One," he drawled, "Never defend in the opening stages of a fight."

The boy flicked his wand over the two, and Fleur felt an immediate relief in her limbs. She hesitantly stood up, a question on her lips. Once more, it was Lotus that asked it for the both of them.

"Why?"

Bayard chuckled.

"You are trying to win, aren't you? As soon as you go on the defensive, you give your opponent an advantage. Transfigured walls, any form of shield charm. Those are the tools of inexperience. Only men wanting to die defend first, for to do so allows the enemy to dictate the fight on their terms. Never defend. Attack. Attack, attack, attack. Drive your opponent back through weight of spells. Hurl

everything you have against him. Force him to act defensively, and you have won already."

The boy pointed to his head.

"It is the mindset, if anything. When you are attacking, you will feel confident. Strong. Invincible, even. Those feelings will lead to victory. When you are defending, you will feel cautious. That caution will turn to panic, and then to fear. You will make mistakes. You will commit errors. All of that will make losing inevitable."

"But it iz standard dueling procedure to cast a Protego," Fleur protested.

"But we aren't dueling, are we, Miss Delacour?" her bodyguard replied smoothly, "We are fighting for our lives. Fighting for our families. At least that is what you wanted to learn?"

The quarter-Veela nodded slowly.

"Then forget whatever you have been taught in terms of dueling. They will get you killed on the battlefield," the boy looked at the both of them in turn, "In a fight you will be expected to do the unthinkable to win while using every trick in the book to survive. You will defeat your opponent in the most conniving ways possible. You will force him to his knees through the most dishonorable methods you can think of. You will be an utter bastard to win. You may think badly of yourself at the end of the day, but by tomorrow, you will wake and he will not. That is all there is."

"But how will we defend ourselves if things go badly?" Lotus asked, "There will be times when we are put in difficult situations."

"The best defense against spellwork is to not get hit at all," the boy smiled, "Movement is key. Always move. Never stay in one position. Never falter in your motion. Attack while you move and you have the perfect defense already."

"Zat iz not possible," Fleur stated, "Spells travel too quick to be dodged. You will be lucky to avoid even one."

"Want to bet?"

The quarter-Veela blinked in surprise.

"Bet?"

"Yes. I bet you that I can avoid every spell you can throw at me."

Fleur stared dubiously at the boy.

"You are letting us hit you with our zpellz just to prove a point?"

"I am," her bodyguard smiled cheerily back, "But you won't hit me."

The way Bayard said it made Fleur's face flush. His confidence was equally attractive as it was infuriating. The quarter-Veela both wanted to bask in it and break it.

Fleur sneaked a glance in Lotus's direction and noticed the Asian witch looked uneasy, as though if dreading what was to come. That made her feel slightly less assured. But surely, what Bayard was suggesting, that movement alone was the best defense, could not be true?

The boy, meanwhile, stood steady and relaxed. Confidence radiated from in waves. For Merlin's sake, he had even pocketed his wand! The quarter-Veela ground her teeth together.

She adopted a duelist's stance, legs slightly apart, wand out and ready to cast. Lotus followed suit, but her stance was much less formal. Fleur didn't care. She just wanted to wipe the silly grin off Bayard's face.

With a faint growl she sent a wordless Stunning Spell jetting from her wand. The beam of bright red light crossed the distance between the boy and her in a blink of an eye, and Fleur was sure it would connect. It didn't. At the last possible second, Bayard twisted his torso, and the Stupefy sped harmlessly past his chest.

Fleur stared.

Another flash of red from beside her told the quarter-Veela that Lotus was trying the same thing. This time, the Stupefy was aimed for her bodyguard's head. The spell careened towards Bayard at a

record pace. The boy merely cocked his head to one side, and the beam that was sent towards his face merely gazed past his cheek.

Shakily, Fleur tried a Petrificus Totalus. Bayard sidestepped, and whilst in mid-step, swiveled to avoid Lotus's cast Diffindo.

Still smiling that damnable smile, the boy began to walk towards them.

Fleur cast every spell in her considerable arsenal, some more than twice. Bayard dodged them all. It was beyond irritating. She had never felt this frustrated in her life. In all her mock duels her opponents had casted back, conjured things that she could hit, and behaved as wizards ought to behave. Bayard was random. Completely and utterly unpredictable. She just couldn't hit him. Fleur shot a look at her temporary partner. Lotus had long ago given up, and instead had drawn her blade for the inevitable clash at close quarters. The quarter-Veela swallowed. She had been trained in dueling with wands. Dueling with fists was an entirely different matter.

Ten yards away from the two and the boy began speeding up. Lotus moved to intercept him, her sword brandished high. Bayard spun away as the curved blade descended, and as the weapon cleaved empty air, moved back into striking range. A light slap from one hand deprived Lotus of her blade, while the other lunged to grasp the hilt. Then in one smooth motion the boy returned the sword back into its sheathe by the woman's side, stomped painfully on her feet, and jabbed her twice in the stomach.

Fleur had blinked twice in the span it took for the events to occur. By the third blink, Lotus was rolling on the ground in pain. The boy turned to her.

The quarter-Veela's face drained of all color.

Stupefy. Incarcerous. Petrificus Totalus. She sent in rapid succession.

Her bodyguard wove past the Stunning Spell, ducked under the thick ropes that flew to bind him, and spun on his heel to avoid the Full Body-Bind Curse. And then he was in front of her, smile bright on his handsome face.

Fleur moved back. Bayard moved forward.

Her wand wavered. At such close range, she couldn't miss could she? The Stunning Spell was about to blast from the tip of her wand when Bayard swatted away her hand. A crimson beam lanced upwards and disappeared into the sky. The boy's hand returned, the fingers latching tight onto her wrist. She marveled at the strength in his grip. Her bodyguard pulled, and suddenly Fleur was no longer moving back.

The quarter-Veela was jerked to a stop, held in place by the boy's other hand that had gripped her waist in a dancer's embrace. Her bodyguard's leg had also somehow entwined itself with one of her own and locked her in place to prevent her from moving. Fleur's breath hitched in her throat. She had always thought him nice to look at, but up close, face to face, the boy's attractiveness seemed to grow. Bayard's eyes gleamed with an intensity that could not be described. His hair was an unruly mess that demanded to be tamed. His cheeks shone with a healthy, striking color.

For a moment, Fleur wondered how his lips would taste.

"Miss Delacour," Bayard purred.

"Yes?" she breathed back dreamily.

"Do forgive me."

And then the boy let go and Fleur Delacour found herself on the ground for a second time.

The quarter-Veela was angry. Partly because the fall hurt. Mostly because her bodyguard had ruined a perfectly romantic moment.

Bayard smiled as she rose to a sitting position.

"Always expect the unexpected, Miss Delacour. That is Lesson Number Two. Leave nothing to chance. No matter how impossible it might seem. It can save your life one day."

Fleur stared up as the boy offered his hand. She was still indignant. Very much so. Perhaps that was why she did what she did.

The quarter-Veela sprang for her bodyguard. Her inner predator crowed in victory as her shoulder collided with Bayard's abdomen. The boy gave an "oomph" of surprise and then fell backwards, with Fleur on top of him.

Her hands pinned his shoulders to the ground. Her hips straddled his waist. Strands of her long, silvery-blond hair dipped and snaked across his face. Fleur bent closer, so that she could whisper the words she wanted him to hear.

"How's zat for ze unexpected?"

The boy, even in his defenseless state, continued to smile.

"Very good, Miss Delacour. You are learning fast."

The quarter-Veela leaned in even closer. The predator within her demanded she do something, anything, to her cornered prey. Images assaulted her mind, all of them quite scandalous. She repressed them with difficulty, no small feat by itself. Were she a full-blooded Veela, the boy would be naked right now.

"Most men would kill to be in your position," she knew it was a boast, but she couldn't help herself. Fleur was proud of her beauty. And rightly so. But she was not narcissistic. Definitely not. Vain and conceited were never words to describe Veela, as beautiful as they were.

The boy chuckled.

"Miss Delacour," he said softly, "I am not most men."

Nevertheless, his hands snaked down and wrapped around her waist. Fleur shivered in delight. His fingers seemed to dance along her sides, and the sensuous motions caused a small sigh of contentment to escape her lips. And then her bodyguard's fingers locked in place, grasped tight her waist in an iron grip. Fleur looked down in alarm. The boy winked back.

Bayard's muscles flexed, and his arms whipped up, taking Fleur along with them. The quarter-Veela felt the sudden sensation of weightlessness as she was flung into the air. She landed hard, and



gasped as the wind left her lungs. The boy's Petrificus Totalus made sure she stayed there.

"Lesson Number Three," Bayard smiled as he loomed above her, "Never believe your foe has been bested unless he's dead. He just might have enough strength left to defy you."

Luna had had a very good week. No Nargles had bothered her at all during the past seven days. But Luna knew better than to let her guard down. Nargles were very devious creatures, after all. You never knew when they would come back.

The blonde Ravenclaw skipped down to breakfast. The Wrackspurt on her shoulder bounced with the motion. Luna paused. It had been a welcome addition into her life, the Wrackspurt. The little snake thing did not require any feeding, though Luna tried anyways. It did not make sound, as other pets were want to do, though Luna imagined it telling her stories about its Wrackspurt adventures. Luna did not like to admit it, but sometimes her time at Hogwarts was quite lonely. The Wrackspurt amended her loneliness somewhat, and the Ravenclaw was glad for that. It also helped tremendously that her new pet could not be seen by most. Luna was sure the Nargles would come back and try to steal the Wrackspurt from her if they knew it existed.

And then there was the boy. He really was a nice boy. He didn't call her Looney or make fun of her remarks. He seemed oddly understanding, and also slightly protective. Luna nodded to herself. Of course, that was because she was Lady Wrackspurt. A lord had to be protective of his lady, after all.

Luna was suddenly halted in her tracks, and quite forcibly too. The Wrackspurt was jolted from its resting position, and raised a lazy, eyeless head in confusion.

She looked up to see a boy towering before her dressed in Ravenclaw robes. Luna remembered him as a Beater in her house's quidditch team. Samuels if she recalled correctly. He was wearing an ugly grin. Behind him were half a dozen boys, some she didn't recognize. They were sporting the same unpleasant smirks.

"Well, well, it looks like we've finally found you Looney," Samuels was the ringleader it seemed, and the boy pushed her roughly back,

"I don't know what you did, but whatever it was you broke my new trunk."

Luna was honestly confused.

"Why would the Nargles hide my things in your trunk?"

The boy looked at her with a mixture of anger and disbelief.

"You really are barmy aren't you?" the gang he brought with him chortled nastily, "Whatever. You broke my new trunk, Lovegood. My parents paid good money for it. I'm going to make you pay."

"Hex her good Jason," one of the boys said, looking eager.

"She broke my trunk too," another spoke, "Give her a good one!"

Samuels chuckled. Luna shivered. It sounded so unlike the boy with the Wrackspurt's. His had been pleasant, even if fake. This one was filled with malice.

The Beater's wand appeared in his hand, and Samuels pointed it at her.

Luna flinched.

A tense second passed by. Followed by another. And then another. When no spell came, Luna opened her eyes to see Samuels and the other boys staring at her in wide-eyed horror. They were staring at her chest.

Luna looked down to see a human hand twitching, connected to her bosom by a black, shadowy substance. The Ravenclaw was surprised. Now that was something you didn't see everyday!

The hand was wrapped in armor, its digits akin to claws. They jerked and convulsed, the armored fingers, moved in seemingly erratic yet mesmerizing patterns. And then they stopped, the fingers spread open wide like the talons of some gigantic bird of prey.

"What the-"

Faster than lighting, the hand shot forward, grasped Samuels's wand arm in a grip as tight as steel, and caused the boy to cry out in fear.

The arm, covered in segmented plate, was swiftly followed by a head. Orbs of emerald fire glared from the crossed visor, gleaming with malevolence. Curved horns jutted out, framed the helm, made it look even more terrifying. Shoulders emerged, great pauldrons of black steel, and then the chest, broader and more immense than any normal man's. Armored joints seemed to snarl as they moved, and the soft rasp of steel sliding from its sheathe was heard.

The sword that materialized was a lifeless black that somehow still shone with lethality. For a second, it was just that, a sword. And then the flames came. White hot fire lit along the entire blade, ran across its edges and surface, and seemed to suck in the very air around it.

The knight, now fully corporeal, stepped from Luna's body and lifted Samuels high into the air. It turned to the rest of the would-be bullies, the Beater dangling by his wand arm in one hand and the flaming sword held threateningly in the other.

"Boo," Hate said.

The Ravenclaws bolted. Luna swore she had never seen anyone run so fast.

The knight turned its attention back to Samuels, who was now whimpering in terror. Luna did not envy the Beater's position. He was being held quite high, and if Luna remembered correctly, that made him a perfect candidate for possession by Jurumpers. Luna was about to suggest for the Wrackspurt to put down the boy when it spoke.

"You are such a delectable little morsel," Luna was not surprised in the least that Hate's voice sounded exactly like the one she had heard in her mind, "There will be many who wish to feast on your weakling soul."

The knight smashed Samuels against the wall, and the back of the boy's head collided painfully against the stone.

Luna winced. Now that would make him very susceptible to Wrackspurts in the future.

"It will be a very painful process," Hate hissed through its visor, "for your soul to be devoured. Your flesh has to go first. It is the wrapping that hides your spirit, and the demons of Hell are ravenous in their hunger. They will tear at your skin. They will gnaw at your flesh. They will suck the marrow from your bones. Of course, you will be kept alive through all of it. The Hellspawn enjoy music to their feast, you see, and nothing excites them more than the screams of the damned."

The knight's sword shrieked. A howling, screeching dirge that made Luna's eardrums ring.

"Just like that," Hate's voice grated, and the shrieking stopped, "When at last your flesh has been stripped from your bones, the demons will reach your soul and violate it in ways you cannot hope to imagine. A thousand different pains you will feel. A thousand burning agonies they will inflict upon you over and over again. You will be allowed no rest. Pain will be your home. Suffering will be your only friend. You will be ended. You will die, and the last thing you will hear in the coming darkness is the laughter of thirsting gods."

Samuels's eyes rolled into the back of his head in a dead faint and Luna crinkled her nose in disgust as the stench of urine spread from the Beater's robes.

Hate growled low in its throat and then dropped the boy in an undignified heap.

"Coward," it spat.

The knight turned, and looked at her with its burning eyes.

"Are you alright Moon Child?"

Luna blinked, and then pointed to the Wrackspurt's sword.

"That's a neat trick."

The fire that ran along the blade's edges abruptly ceased, flickering out of existence.

"Who said it was a trick?" the knight replied, a hint of humor in its stentorian tone.

Luna did not reply and instead gazed glumly at her feet.

"I didn't know Wrackspurts were visible to other people as well," she said sadly. She had been hoping that it had been a gift. Seeing Wrackspurts that is. It had made her feel special.

The knight seemed to understand, for when it next spoke, its voice was tinged with a trace of kindness.

"I choose when to appear to mortal eyes, Moon Child. In this case, I was sent."

Luna was assailed at once with an image of a smiling boy with emerald green eyes, and for some strange reason, her sadness melted away, replaced by a serenity that lingered in her heart and warmed her body.

"Thank you," she said, and then paused, "Do you think you could give an interview with my father's magazine, Mr. Wrackspurt? It's called the Quibbler, and it's quite good. You can talk about how Wrackspurts behave in the wild, how they find food and mates. We can even do photos."

Hate chuckled.

"You will have to ask my lord for his permission."

"Of course," Luna nodded sagely, "Do you think Lord Wrackspurt will agree to an interview as well? I'm honestly curious as to why Wrackspurts need lords... Now that I think about it, I'm already Lady Wrackspurt aren't I? That means I'm a Wrackspurt too, just like you."

Luna furrowed her brow in thought.

"You can't give an interview to yourself can you?"

"You would be the first one to try," Luna had the impression the knight was smiling underneath its helm.

The Ravenclaw blinked again, and then remembered that the Wrackspurt of last week had been a black, shapeless mass. But somehow it had turned into a human. That led to an interesting variety of possibilities.

"I have a very serious question, Mr. Wrackspurt," Luna began solemnly.

"A very serious question you say?" the Wrackspurt-turned-human sounded amused, "Pray tell me. Just how serious is this question?"

"Very serious," the Ravenclaw responded sternly, "It can change the world."

"That serious? Very well. Ask away Moon Child."

Luna nodded.

"Can you turn into a Crumple-Horned Snorkack?"

## Chapter 10: The Goblet of Fire

The Goblet of Fire was such a simple looking thing to be the decider of the Triwizard Tournament. At least, that's what it seemed like to Fleur Delacour. The word 'goblet' meant a chalice to the quarter-Veela's mind, an exquisite, expensive thing of invaluable worth that held equally invaluable fluids. Such as the Elixir of Life, for example. The Goblet of Fire, in comparison, was a cup. A giant, heavy cup half the size of a grown man, but a cup nevertheless. Its body looked like it had been cut from a block of wood, and its insides hollowed out by the craftsman to hold whatever contents was deemed necessary at the time. Engravings had been made into wooden surface, arcane syllables that Fleur held no hope of ever understanding. Still, the engravings served to make the goblet appear more mysterious, more cryptic to the eye, something that the quarter-Veela was grateful for.

Fleur stepped back and watched as the paper containing her name was consumed in a flash of purple fire.

Inwardly, the quarter-Veela felt a bit guilty at having placed her name in the goblet so late into the year. All of her Beauxbatons friends had already done so. Aimeric had placed his the day the goblet was unveiled. Claire had followed a day later. She had placed hers the day before the selection of the Champions was to begin.

The time she spent with the boy, now that he was training her, and added to her classes, had pushed any thoughts of the Triwizard Tournament to the back of her mind. It was an ironic thing for the quarter-Veela to have forgotten, and Fleur was a tad afraid that her friends would think less of her for it.

Fleur turned to walk away, and was met by a brown-haired witch sporting an impish grin.

"Finally decided to toss your name into the cup, eh?" Claire said haughtily in French, but Fleur could see the amusement twinkling in her friend's eyes, "You must have gotten fat and lazy from eating all this English food."

Her fears vanished in a flash.

The quarter-Veela put on the best aristocratic face she could muster, and sniffed just as haughtily.

"You should know, Claire. I've seen you stuffing food down your throat every breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Claire snorted, tried to look affronted, failed, and broke into giggles. Behind her, Bayard and Aimeric strode a short distance away, both talking heatedly while a little blonde girl followed them.

Fleur frowned slightly.

She really didn't know what to think of Luna Lovegood. On one hand, the girl was rather batty. The things she said would either cause the entire table to stare at her or laugh into their plates. On the other, she was a rather likeable person. The quarter-Veela didn't like to admit it, but Luna had a certain quality in her person that endeared her to others. Perhaps that was the reason why Bayard was so amicable to her.

Another reason in the girl's favor, one that made Fleur frown in distaste, was quite simply, that Luna didn't have many friends. In fact, the quarter-Veela was sure Bayard had been her only one their first few weeks of stay at Hogwarts. Of course, over time, the rest of the Beauxbatons contingent had accepted her as one of their own, and Luna became a common presence among the blue-uniformed students.

Fleur's frown grew.

The way the English school was structured, with its four houses and points system, made finding friends outside your house a near impossibility. There were acquaintances that you met in classes, but your real friends, the ones you could trust, were your house. This system had failed Luna at the start. The Ravenclaws were a studious, serious lot, focused on academics. The random and unpredictable nature that Luna brought with her grated against the house's principles, and Fleur guessed it was not long before her admittance to Hogwarts that the girl found herself a target for bullies.

Fleur had been a target herself during her first year at Beauxbatons. However, she had the allure to help her, and could send the



braggarts away tongue-tied and glassy-eyed. Luna was just a regular girl, with nothing to help her except her innate quirkiness.

She wanted so much to dislike the little Ravenclaw. If not for her randomness than for the closeness she seemed to share with Bayard. But Fleur couldn't. Her sense of justice wouldn't allow her to.

As the trio drew near, the quarter-Veela switched mentally to English to be polite.

"It iz not much to look at, iz it?" Aimeric inclined his head towards the Goblet of Fire as he approached, "It zeems a little plain to be zuch an important artifact."

Fleur agreed with him.

"Well, isn't it zupposed to be really old?" Claire asked, "I would think whoever made it forged it from the best materials at ze time."

"It's a little more complicated than that," Bayard pointed to the goblet's side, "Wood channels magic better than most materials. That's why our wands are made from wood. Whoever made the Goblet of Fire wanted to pool a lot of magical energy. If they had chosen gold, silver, or Merlin forbid, steel, the magic would have dissipated over time."

"Zat actually makes a lot of sense," Aimeric rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "You would zink that ze crafter zat made it would want ze goblet to last."

The boy smiled.

"More or less."

"How do you zink ze Goblet chooses champions zen?"

"No idea," Bayard said cheerfully, "And I have no intentions of finding out. The Weasley twins got hit by a rather nasty collection of hexes when they tried to put their names in the goblet. Grew beards the size of Dumbledore's."

The small group all chuckled at the memory, except for Luna, who had a very serious look on her face.

"I know how the goblet works."

The group stopped chuckling and stared at the Ravenclaw.

"You do?"

"It's actually quite simple," Luna said sagely, "The Goblet of Fire chooses champions based on the number of Wrackspurts they possess."

"The number of Wrackspurts zey possess?" Aimeric repeated, looking interested.

"Why yes," Luna nodded seriously, "The more Wrackspurts you have, the better. That's why Fleur is going to be selected. Because she already has one."

Both Claire and Aimeric turned to stare at her. Fleur shrugged her shoulders helplessly. She had no clue what a Wrackspurt was either.

"And what do zese Wrackspurts look like?" Aimeric asked. The quarter-Veela rolled her eyes while Claire tried to stifle her laughter. Their pureblooded friend could get a bit thickheaded at times, especially when he had a goal in mind. Currently, Aimeric wanted to represent Beauxbatons as champion, and he was willing to listen to whatever advice if that would improve his chances.

"It all depends," Luna said mysteriously, "Mine is rather small, and so is Fleur's, but Lord Wrackspurt has a really big one."

"A really, really big one," confirmed Bayard, smiling. Fleur gave him a surprised look. She had expected her bodyguard to deny the Ravenclaw's assertion, not go along with it.

"Yup," Luna chirped, "It's a shame really. If Professor Dumbledore hadn't created the age limit, Lord Wrackspurt would have been the champion of all three schools. That's how big his Wrackspurt is. But since there is an age limit, neither Lord Wrackspurt nor I can compete. I hope the tasks are more mundane this time around. If they have Crumple-Horned Snorkacks as a challenge this year, I will be most disappointed."

"And how should I go about obtaining these Wrackspurts?" Aimeric had developed a solemn look, and Fleur was sure if the pureblood had a quill and parchment; he'd be taking notes.

"You can have Lord Wrackspurt's Wrackspurt slam your head against a wall," Luna suggested.

"Umm," Aimeric seemed rather disquieted at the idea, "I do not zink zat will work."

"That's a pity," Luna said sadly, "Perhaps you can ask Lord Wrackspurt's Wrackspurt to use his big fiery sword on you? If he stabs you maybe some of the Wrackspurts will transfer over?"

Fleur sighed. Claire giggled. Bayard just looked amused.

"No, wait," Luna's brows crossed in concentration, "Never mind. Lord Wrackspurt's Wrackspurt just told me he only stabs his big fiery sword into people who deserve it. I'm sorry Aimeric. It looks like you won't be getting stabbed by big fiery swords in the immediate future."

"Zat iz... good?" the pureblood managed back.

Before the conversation could go on further, a nervous, yet brave voice came from behind them.

"Er... Sorry to bother you all," the Beauxbatons students turned to see a Fourth Year in Gryffindor robes looking slightly nauseous. By his side were two others, a bushy-haired girl carrying a large book and a lanky, red-headed boy whose cheeks had turned an unhealthy shade of crimson. Fleur glowered back. She recognized the redhead. The boy constantly sent her looks from the Gryffindor table. It annoyed her. The redhead noticed the displeased expression on her face and hastily looked away.

"Hey, my name's Adam," the boy who had spoken continued, "And uh... Can I talk to Bayard? Alone?"

Three pairs of eyes descended on the boy in question. Luna looked at the ceiling and hummed. Her bodyguard shrugged nonchalantly.

"I don't see why not."

The Gryffindor's face immediately became relieved.

"Thanks," Adam flashed a grateful grin, "It won't take long. I promise."

Hermione and Ron had left as soon as the Beauxbatons students had. Of course, Hermione had left willingly. All Ron did was just stand in place and stare at the beautiful blonde witch's retreating backside. Hermione had to drag the redhead away, and Adam winced as he imagined the stern telling to the bookworm would give to his best friend.

Now, with both parties gone, that just left Bayard and him in the Great Hall. Well, the Goblet of Fire was there too, its flames casting an eerie glow about the place. The silence was strained, awkward, and Adam knew he would be the one to have to break it.

The Boy-Who-Lived swallowed his nervousness.

"Errr... I heard what happened between my parents and you. At the welcoming feast, I mean."

Bayard raised a single eyebrow.

"That was quite some time ago," he said mildly.

"Yeah, well," the Gryffindor scratched the back of his head sheepishly, "It took a while for me to needle what happened out of them."

"I see," Adam had the faint impression that the Beauxbatons boy was judging him. How, he didn't know.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry. For their behavior that is. It must have been really awkward."

Bayard shrugged.

"I hold no grudge against them. They lost a loved one and saw some resemblance in me to him," emerald eyes fixed unblinkingly on Adam, "He was your brother, was he not?"

"Yeah, he was," the Boy-Who-Lived nodded, relieved that the boy had accepted his apology, "His name was Harry."

"He must have meant something... special... to your family."

Adam winced. The way Bayard said those words made him feel all the more guilty for his brother's fate.

"He was my twin," the Gryffindor said sadly, "But with the way I acted towards him, it was more like he was my enemy. I was a right prat when we were young. Blamed everything that went wrong on him, and my parents believed me. Mum and dad always trusted me over Harry."

"Surely," Bayard said smoothly, "It wasn't that bad."

"You have no idea," Adam laughed bitterly, "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived. I was a saint in their eyes. Still am in some ways. I could literally do nothing wrong. If my brother and I got in an argument, they always took my side. They thought Harry was jealous of my fame and made up things to get attention."

"Sibling rivalry is not exactly uncommon," the Beauxbatons boy pointed out, "That mustn't have been the only reason."

"It wasn't. But it still contributed," the Gryffindor rubbed his forehead tiredly, not knowing why he was telling his life's story to this stranger. But it was a relief, to get things off his chest for once, so he went on, "Things continued the way it was, until I reached five or six. That was when my parents started parading me to all their friends. I was their pride and joy, the savior of the Wizarding World, and they wanted everyone to know it. Looking back it was kind of foolish. Well, it was more than foolish. It was stupid of them, and it was stupid of me to go along with the whole thing. But I was just a kid. What the heck did I know? Mum and dad were proud of me and that was all that mattered."

"Harry must have grown up quite isolated," Bayard remarked.

Adam sighed.

"Yeah he did. Not completely isolated, but enough. Dumbledore would occasionally visit, and he made sure to go check up on Harry

each time to see how he was doing. Sirius and Remus did too, but I guess it was never enough. Merlin knows my mum and dad didn't have the time of day for him back then."

"How do parents simply forget about their child?" the Beauxbatons boy looked honestly curious, "I would assume your Harry tried to gain their attention more than once."

"He did," the Boy-Who-Lived admitted, "But they weren't very effective. At least, not that I recall. So he eventually stopped trying. He just kinda gave up. He stopped coming down to dinner with us. He stopped joining us in the games of family quidditch, not that there was much place for him to begin with. He stopped doing whatever we enjoyed doing. He just stayed in his room most of the time."

"Surely you must have tried to bring him out of his shell," Bayard's voice was earnest, "Done something to bring him back. His indifference could turn out for the worse."

Adam's face grew pained.

"Yeah, well, I wish somebody told me that earlier."

"You didn't?" the foreign student's eyes widened.

The Boy-Who-Lived sighed again.

"We didn't know how bad it would be. We just assumed Harry was being difficult on purpose. So when he stopped coming down for dinner, mum stopped setting a plate for him on the table. And when he stopped flying, well, dad thought it would be nice for me to have a second broom."

"That was not very intelligent of you. Or your family."

"Oh you have no idea," Adam snorted, "We made such stupid decisions back then, but at the time, they seemed right, you know?"

"So what happened next? The students here have told me that your brother ran away, but they didn't tell me the exact reason."

The Gryffindor grimaced. The rumor mill at Hogwarts was sometimes worse than the gossip columns of the Daily Prophet. He

had been the target of both himself, and they had not been pretty experiences.

"Well, I think it was a combination of reasons. The indifference. My fame. Us being stupid. I think in the end Harry just couldn't take it and left. Merlin knows I would have."

"And now you are feeling regret?" Bayard's eyes were piercing, and Adam shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, "A little too late, don't you think?"

The Boy-Who-Lived felt a flash of anger, but as soon as it appeared, it left. He felt tired, defeated, and empty.

"Regret isn't a word I'd use to describe what I felt... what all of us felt when Harry left."

"Oh? What word would you use then?"

Adam swept a hand through his hair, a mannerism he had copied from his father when nervous or agitated.

"It's something I just can't describe with words you know? Dumbledore was there to see us that day. I remember it well. I had just performed my first bout of magic. Accidentally levitated my mum's prized china and dropped them on the floor. She was angry at me at first but then she started tearing up," Adam noticed Bayard's incredulous expression and chuckled ruefully, "I could do no wrong remember? Well, she got my dad to floo home from work and when he heard what I did, he just about smothered me in hugs."

"Something that doesn't happen much to Harry I assume."

Adam nodded sadly.

"I really don't remember the two of them doing anything affectionate for Harry. They might have when we were toddlers... I don't know. Anyways, Dumbledore did the whole congratulations thing, told me I was going to be a great wizard someday and all that jazz. I thought my parents were going to burst from pride. Dumbledore then asked where Harry was, and my mum told him he was in his room."

Adam paused and shuddered as he recalled the memory.

"You know how Dumbledore appears kinda odd sometimes? Senile even?" Bayard inclined his head in acknowledgment, "Well, that's all an act. The whole wise old Headmaster thing. Dumbledore's scary powerful. He's the one that defeated Grindelwald. And as soon as he goes up the stairs, he comes back down, and I've never seen anything more terrifying in my life. That twinkling in his eye? Completely gone. The grandfatherly smile he always wears when he's looking at you? That was gone as well. I could literally feel the anger coming from him. He looked furious. Enraged even. He wasn't yelling or anything like that, but the way he looked at me, at my parents, made me feel like I was the scum of the earth."

"It must have been a frightening experience," the Beauxbatons boy commented, "What did your parents do?"

"They were confused, and slightly angry. They thought Dumbledore would be proud of me for my first bout of magic. Looking back, it should have been obvious what was wrong, but we were all blinded by the fame. Since I was the Boy-Who-Lived, and naturally nothing could be my fault, they asked if Harry had done something bad."

"Again, not a very intelligent thing to do."

"Definitely not," Adam confirmed, "Dumbledore just looked at us and said "Harry is gone" and then flooded out of the house. The three of us just kinda stared at each other for a while, and then it began to sink in. Mum was first up the stairs, and by the time me and my dad got there, she was crying her eyes out. Harry's room was empty. All of his stuff was untouched, but there was no Harry."

"How did you know he ran away?" Bayard asked, "He could have left to take a walk or something similar."

"That's what we thought too, but when mum and dad searched everywhere around the house and outside and couldn't find him, we knew that he left. It was then that reality kinda crashed down on us. I mean, everything seemed so perfect. I was the Boy-Who-Lived. I had parents who loved me. The whole wizarding world was in awe of me. Harry just never factored into the equation," the Gryffindor halted and shook his head forlornly, "And I miss him, you know? Not miss him because of what we did, but for who he is. If that makes any sense."



"A little," the foreign student replied.

"He's my brother," Adam said softly, "My twin. We were supposed to be best friends. I already have Ron and Hermione, but Harry was supposed to be different. We were supposed to do everything together. Joke and laugh. Think up pranks. Talk about quidditch. But now I won't ever get that chance. Remember how I said it's not regret we feel? It's just too simple a word to describe what I'm.... what all of us are feeling. It's like a part of me is missing. Empty. I feel.... incomplete without him."

"You were brothers," Bayard sounded sympathetic, "Blood is thicker than water, after all."

"Yeah. You're right," Adam flashed the boy a small grin, "Thanks for understanding. A lot of others aren't."

"Aren't?"

"Aren't as understanding," the Gryffindor frowned as memories began to resurface, "When news first got out that Harry ran away, the press just about ate us alive. We went from being the perfect family everyone admired to the household all of the wizarding world despised. Our house was flooded with Howlers after the first day the Daily Prophet printed the story. A lot of my parents' friends, the ones they met in the higher circles, abandoned them overnight. A lot of their old ones did too. I know Dumbledore was really disappointed in us. McGonagall refused to have anything to do with us until Hogwarts. Even Sirius and Remus stayed away for a while."

"And you don't think that's rightful punishment? For what you did to Harry?"

Adam squirmed as he thought about the question.

"Honestly, I think we deserved more," Bayard seemed surprised at the confession, and Adam hastened to explain, "I mean we may have lost a lot of our friends and other things, but whenever I start to think it's unfair, I remember Harry. Heck, I don't even know if he's still alive out there. And even if he is, I doubt it's anything better than our lives. Losing some prestige seems so superficial, you know, when you're worrying about your next meal."

"I'm sure, wherever he is, he's fine."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Your parents must have been quite saddened by Harry's loss."

Adam's frown grew deeper.

"That's putting it lightly. They were absolutely miserable. Even after the media vultures left. My mum just kinda folded in on herself. She wouldn't say much to anyone for the longest time. My dad just aged. He lost his sense of humor, his love of flying. He just woke up every morning to go to work and then came back after his shift ended. It was surreal. To watch them wither away. I thought I was going to lose them to the despair, but thankfully, when my Hogwarts letter arrived, they pulled themselves through," the frown disappeared, replaced by a small, but relieved smile, "They were really happy for me. And not just because I was the Boy-Who-Lived. The letter seemed to snap them out of their misery, at least for a while. My dad went back to his cheerful self, but sometimes he'll get real sad and sit by himself by the fireplace. My mum's usually bright and happy, but whenever she thinks of Harry she'll just start tearing up again."

Adam sighed.

"My dad's strong, so I don't worry about him. My mum is too, but I think Harry leaving affected her more than any of us. You know she took up the Muggle Studies position here just for that reason? She thinks that maybe someday Harry will show up at Hogwarts, to be taught. I know it sounds illogical and all, but she won't see sense. And that worries us. I can envision her still teaching at this school even after I graduate, and continuing year after year until she's an old woman. Maintaining that false hope that Harry will somehow come back."

"Perhaps it is that hope that gives her strength?" Bayard suggested, "Even if it is fake."

"Yeah, but me and my dad are still worry about her, you know? What might happen if that hope suddenly disappears. I don't think she could live through the pain."

"I'm sure she could," the Beauxbatons boy smiled, "She appeared to me as a very resilient person."

"Thanks," Adam nodded gratefully, and then adopted a sheepish grin, "Sorry about all of this. Me telling you this whole thing. I'm sure you had better things to do."

"On the contrary, it was a very enlightening experience. It is good to hear another side of the story."

"Yeah, that's what Hermione always tells me. I've got to look at things from another perspective."

The two stood in affable silence for a while before Adam broke it again.

"Well, I need to head back to the dorms. I don't want to be caught by Filch after curfew. I swear the man has an ugly streak the width of a quidditch pitch."

Bayard offered an understanding smile.

"Of course."

He's not a bad kid, thought Adam as he turned around. The Boy-Who-Lived slowly trudged back towards the Gryffindor commons.

If he had looked back, he would have seen the slightest of scowls marring Bayard's face.

Inase Takahashi had never felt pain such as this. Her entire body was covered in cuts, not deep enough to be harmful, but certainly enough to bleed. The instructors back in her village had believed pain was just a proficient a teacher as words, and in her sparring sessions with them, she had received an occasional bruise from the wooden swords they used. Hence, she had come to the training session with the knight, by the lake, expecting pain. Bruises. Welts. Perhaps even a cracked rib or two.

Hate had in their first bout, disarmed her and then drew a thin, elongated gash down the side of her neck. The wound still bled.

Inase had thought, hoped, that the injury was an accident. That hope was quashed when in their next bout the knight carved a line across her cheek.

That had occurred fifteen minutes ago, and already the witch was tiring from the cumulated effects of the wounds the knight had produced on her body. Hate had been surgical with her, unlike it had with the boy, and had made her pay for every mistake she made in blood. Once, her footwork had been clumsy. The knight sketched a bloody line across her calf. Another time her grip on her katana had been loose. The knight slashed a four inch long cut down her arm. This time her stance had wavered, and Hate had reciprocated by carving a furrow down her back.

That had been all she could take, and so Inase fell back and landed against the ground in a sitting position with a loud thud.

"Get up," the knight spoke, not a speck of compassion in its iron voice, "I am not through with you yet."

"I am bleeding," she protested, and showed the blood that stained her hands.

"You have bled before. You will live."

The witch gawked at her taskmaster. She had expected Hate to be cruel and heartless in his instruction. But this was a level beyond that.

"You can't be serious. I'll be a corpse at this rate."

"Your exaggerations do you no favors, Lotus. None of your wounds are fatal."

That much was true. The myriad of cuts and gashes that leaked blood from her body were all superficial wounds. They broke skin and cut flesh, but left important arteries and organs alone. Nothing a quick Episkey couldn't fix. Still, they hurt. They hurt a lot. And Hate refused to allow her to mend them. Added to the exhaustion she felt during the brief, yet intense sparring sessions, it made her feel completely drained. She doubted she'd have the strength left to walk back to the castle.

"Get up," the knight said again, "Cease from this weakling behavior."

Inase swallowed the curse that had been forming on her lips with difficulty. Instead, she settled for just glaring at the knight.

"Come at me," Hate ordered.

"No!" Inase was surprised at her own refusal. The knight was her teacher, and she had been taught to always respect teachers. But what the knight asked of her. What it demanded of her, seemed impossible, "I have learned nothing from you! Nor from your master! You just can't expect me to match you all of a sudden! I need to learn the stances! The movements! All you're doing is bashing your sword against mine!"

Hate barked a short, humorless laugh. And then it surged forward, armored form a blur. Inase had time to hurriedly stand back up before it was upon her. The immense blade crashed down, and she felt the weariness in her limbs as her katana rose to deny. The witch grunted at the impact, and the weariness increased tenfold as the knight matched its unholy strength against hers. The two blades locked. Her knees abruptly gave away.

"You are weak," the knight snarled menacingly into her face, and the sword that it held pressed unswervingly towards her shoulder.

Inase fought with all her strength, but it was a futile struggle. The boy had prevailed against the knight because he deflected each blow at an angle, so that the powerful strikes would never connect at full force. She had no such skill.

"You are pathetic," Inase winced as the knight leaned in closer. The smoldering green eyes glared at her tauntingly.

Her katana was touching her own shoulder now, the back of the curved blade pressing painfully down against her skin. She gritted her teeth as Hate slid its weapon down, the black blade screeching as it grated against her own. At the last second, the knight flicked its wrist, and the very tip of its sword slipped past her guard to carve a long gash down her shoulder.

Inase hissed in pain.

"You are inferior," before the witch could respond, the knight backhanded her and sent her tumbling away.

"What the hell is wrong with you!" she lifted her head from the ground and pawed at her aching cheek, "Why are you doing this!"

"I am training you."

"This isn't training," she spat, "This is Hell."

"You must go through Hell first before tasting Heaven. And believe me when I say this is nothing compared to what my lord has suffered through."

"You put him through a regimen like this?" Inase growled out, her fingers clamping tight against her new wound, "As a child?"

"Yes," Hate said simply.

"Madness," she whispered, "You are insane. Merciless. The boy could not have survived."

"Foolish mortal," the knight mocked, "Weak and pathetic you already are, yet you still amaze me with your shortsightedness. You humans never truly realize your species' potential. You train under pretenders. You call them master and grovel before them to learn their pitiful secrets. But they are nothing in the grand scheme of things. So inconsequential that they are little more than a single droplet in a surging ocean."

The witch stood unsteadily back up, and then dropped back down when Hate's armored fist slammed into her stomach.

"Do you really think that power alone comes from strength? Do you really think what my lord intends of you can be learned from some stances and movements? Are you really that blind?"

The knight kicked her. The ironclad boot lifted her off the ground and hurled her ten feet through the air.

"Forget what your wise old men have taught you," Hate snarled as he stalked towards her, "for they are lies twisted to become truth. Forget what is expected of you, for they are nothing but the

demented thoughts of those too weak to defend themselves. Only through blood and pain can you reforge yourself to become stronger, better."

Inase clawed at her fallen blade, wrested from her hand when she had been thrown. The knight stomped down, and she cried out as her fingers were ground painfully under the thing's sole.

"For you to become great, you must first know weakness. For you to ignore pain, you must first walk through the fires of agony. For you to win, you must first learn to lose."

It released her, and the witch cradled her injured hand tenderly.

"Those are universal truths, Lotus. But humanity refuses to accept it. Mankind will not embrace them for fear of the hurt they will cause. But those few who do, shine all the brighter."

Hate flicked her fallen blade towards her with its own. Inase reached for it with trembling hands.

"It is not strength that makes man great. It is not might that makes your race the destined rulers of the stars. It is will! Strength of will! Courage of will!"

She rose painfully, using her katana as support.

"A boy called me into being because of his will. Dragged me from the turmoil of his emotions into existence because he willed it to be so. Do you understand the implications of that, Lotus? That a small, frightened child was capable of creating me? What could humanity do if you willed together? What could your race, spawned as nothing more than the descendants of apes, do if you simply worked together? But instead you fight. You rage. You kill. And for what? Humanity is the brightest star this universe has ever seen, but it is also the scum that the galaxy would wipe from its shoes."

The knight slapped an armored gauntlet against its chest.

"My lord may be only a boy, but his will is as indomitable as the universe itself. He is great because he wills it to be great. He is strong because he wills it to be strong. He is my lord because his

will bends mine, and my devotion to him will last until Creation itself becomes undone."

Inase ached all over. She bled from a dozen wounds purposely inflicted by the knight. Her arms felt like they were on fire.

"Great men become great because they will it! Heroic deeds are done because heroes will it! And believe me when I say you can defeat me, Inase Takahashi, if you will it!"

The knight pointed its massive broadsword at her, its edges cackling with tendrils of magical energy.

"The question is, do you will it?"

The witch bit her lip and brought her katana over her shoulder in the time-honored stance of warriors willing to fight to the death.

Hate smiled.

"I thought so."

And then it charged.



## Chapter 11: Champion

Tonight, the stars have come out. Countless twinkling lights, spread across a vast backdrop of black satin. It is a beautiful sight, beautiful enough that I nearly fail to notice the figure that has come to stand beside me. Though I suppose this sloppiness cannot be blamed solely on me. Clad in his suit of black warplate, Hate blends in with the darkness all too well. Except for his eyes. Orbs of emerald fire burn behind the ironclad visage, and had my resolve not been strengthened long ago, I would have felt the unwelcome sensation of fear prickling along my back.

"How is she?"

The knight turns to me.

"She is... skilled, my lord. And in due time, she may become exceptional."

"But not great," I point out, and tear my gaze from the midnight sky.

Hate shakes his head, the motion accompanied by the creaking of armored joints.

"No, my lord. She will never match you. In skill or in will."

Disappointment flashes. As quickly as it appears it is gone, replaced by acceptance.

"Were you expecting something else?" the knight asks solemnly.

"No," I shake my head slightly, "But I had thought she would be better than most."

"She will be," Hate replies, voice a soft metallic drawl, "Her resolve is strong. Her courage even more so. I will allow her no respite, my lord, and we will see if the samurai lives up to the tales of her forefathers."

"Hmm."

"And yours, my lord?" the knight is still staring at me, even though I face away, "How is she?"

"She is brave, but foolish. She is intelligent, but not cunning. Her will is stronger than most, but doubt still clutters her mind. She is a diamond that still needs to be polished. A gem that still needs to be cut. Valuable, to be sure, but useless without the jewelsmith's art."

Hate inclines his head slightly.

"Is that why you are willing to spend time training her?"

"Yes."

"Is that the only reason?"

I blink.

"What do you mean?"

"The girl is quite beautiful, my lord. There are very few that can match her appearance."

I snort. Hate's eyes flicker ever so slightly. A simple, albeit barely noticeable way of telling me he is amused.

"We have seen our share of beautiful women before. This one is no different."

"A shame," there is a tint of sorrow in my companion's voice, and I raise my brow at this unexpected change, "She would have complimented you quite well."

"Would she?"

"Yes. She is passionate if anything. She is fire against your ice. A welcome warmth to your cold. Treat her well, and she will become an able partner."

It is a tempting thought. And one that I have thought before. But reality rears its head, and those thoughts of mine can be nothing more than bitter dreams. I shake my head.

"It will never work out. Between the two of us."

Hate turns to look at me. I have the impression he is choosing his next words carefully.

"She has taking a liking to you, you know."

I smile sadly.

"I know."

"And you will not reciprocate the feeling?"

"What is the point? I cannot feel, Hate. I will not enslave her with the promises of love when there is none to be found. My cold cannot be warmed. Not by her. Not by anyone else."

"Is that what you believe?"

I stare off into the night. It is a crime for it to be this beautiful.

"We walk this path alone, Hate. It is our curse to bear."

"Only if you choose it to be so, my lord."

I glance at my companion.

"We will talk no more of this subject."

It is a command, and one he cannot disobey.

"As you wish," the knight says simply.

Silence reigns, and I am once more at peace.

Daphne Greengrass had received a letter. Folded in an expensive envelope the color of old paper with the blood red seal of the House of Greengrass stamped across its vanilla surface.

The Ice Queen of Slytherin scratched idly at the seal, and flakes of the hardened wax drifted slowly to the ground.

I'm sorry, Daphne.

The letter had read, penned by her father's tidy hand. Just three words, but to her, it was like a sentence of death.

The Slytherin clutched the parchment to her chest. She had known this could happen, but still, to be faced with it so soon, was almost too much to bear.

She had always regretted making friends with Draco and his ilk in her first year. The way she had clung to him and fought for his attention with Pansy. The way she had tried her best to impress the boy and succeeded. Daphne wondered idly if that Hufflepuff girl would ever forgive her. Just thinking about it made her want to retch.

Second year had brought sense to her, but in some aspects it was already too late. Daphne had made an impression on Draco. Had imprinted that she liked the heir of Malfoy even though she had detested him ever since he made his view towards muggleborns known. To deal with the boy's amorous attentions, her Ice Queen façade had been developed, a guise that served her well. Draco had given up, and Daphne had allowed herself to be misled into a false sense of security.

She should have known that the little git would turn to his father at the merest obstacle.

Her owl, Prometheus, cocked his head to one side and hooted softly. Daphne absently fed him an owl treat. She produced a scratch of paper from her bags and dipped her always present quill in a nearby inkpot. It took her an eternity to figure out a response. How do you convey the message that you didn't want this with all your heart, yet was powerless to stop it? Daphne briefly wondered if her father had felt the same way when he had sent Prometheus to her.

By the time she finally put pen to paper, the ink on the tip of her quill had already dried. Daphne redipped it and scrawled a single word on the parchment.

Stall.

Just one word, but Cygnus Greengrass, like his daughter, would know what it meant.

Prometheus gave her an inquisitive gaze as she folded the parchment neatly. It was as though if the owl could sense his owner's distress. Daphne allowed her fingers to pass through her pet's soft feathers. It was a welcome comfort, even if a small one. The girl gave the owl one final pat and then allowed him to take the parchment in his beak. Prometheus shot her one last concerned look before taking wing.

Daphne watched him disappear into the night sky.

She turned and began to make the long journey from the Owlery to the Slytherin dungeons. It was a long walk, through many a deserted corridor and hall, but it gave her time to think.

A marriage contract. It was a loathsome thought. There had been no such things in wizarding Britain for near a hundred years. But it had never been banned. Purebloods were a conservative lot, and any efforts to change laws of the past, no matter how outdated they were, were seen as an attack against tradition. Daphne was not surprised. For all its superior bluster at being the birthplace of Merlin and the Hogwarts Four, England was perhaps the most backwards-thinking of all magical communities. The laws that many other wizarding nations had repealed as undignified or cruel Britain had kept, not for use, but for the sake of tradition.

Daphne scowled at the irony. Her father had been one of the Wizengamot that had voted against the ban of marriage contracts. No doubt he was regretting that decision now.

A winding corridor later and Daphne stood before the entrance to the Slytherin dorms. The hour was late, but she took no chances. As she entered the dungeon, Daphne's mask formed. Her lips curved downwards in a carefully constructed sneer, her eyes became distant, and her chin tilted up to give the impression of haughty elegance. It was a face that looked permanently disgusted by the vermin that surrounded it, a countenance that made boys and men think twice about coming close. And it had worked. Until now.

Draco had been intimidated away. His little gaggle of friends as well. But this mask could not defend her against a contract backed by magic, especially one wielded by so influential a man as Lucius Malfoy.

The Slytherin commons was deserted save for two figures hunched over a desk. Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini. The first was a slim brunette with a pretty face and long, flowing hair. The other was a black boy with a regal, princely appearance that did not quite match the lethality that shone from his eyes.

Daphne paused. Tracey was her best friend, had been her constant companion from their childhood, and the only one she could trust in the Slytherin dungeons. Blaise had no such history with her, but had won Daphne's friendship nonetheless with his stalwart loyalty and brutal cunning.

The two looked up as she approached. It was a testament to how well they knew her that both Slytherins were instantly aware of something was wrong, despite the indifferent mask that covered her true face.

"Daphne?" Tracey's soft voice spoke up, "Is something the matter?"

Blaise looked on neutrally, but his body radiated concern.

"Yes," the Ice Queen sat down heavily on the chair that had been saved for her.

"What is-" Tracey gasped as her eyes found the letter that was clutched in an iron grip in her hand. Daphne merely nodded, and that was enough. Tracey already knew. She had been the first one Daphne turned to when the prospect of an arranged marriage was brought up by her father. Blaise knew as well, but the Ice Queen hadn't told him. The boy had figured it out on his own, though some details still eluded him.

"Oh Daphne," Tracey's eyes were brimming with unshed tears, "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine Tracey," she smiled falteringly back, "We were expecting this remember? Just not this soon."

"Who is it to?" Blaise half-whispered, half-growled.

The two girls refused to answer. Their silence needed no explanation.

"Not Draco?"

Daphne flinched. Blaise let out a low, threatening hiss.

"We could kill him. Hide the body. Nobody will ever know."

Both girls laughed weakly. The boy looked completely serious.

"Merlin," Tracey exclaimed, "You're not joking."

"No, I'm not. I'm sure we can toss him in the lake or even bury the git in the Forbidden Forest."

"I can't believe you're talking about murder! You could get arrested with so many aurors for the tournament around!"

"I'd rather be carted off to Azkaban than allow Malfoy to get his dirty claws on Daphne."

The Ice Queen felt a faint warmth flow into her heart, despite the situation. Her friends, however few they were, remained loyal to her.

"Forget you going to Azkaban," Tracey growled, "It should be Malfoy and his father being sent to that place for this piece of trash they've written up."

Blaise laughed darkly.

"Bloody unlikely. It's legal, believe it or not. Just barely used. The Malfoys must have gotten some serious dirt on your parents to get them to agree to a contract like that."

Daphne grimaced. The Greengrasses had never been a particularly affluent family. They could afford luxuries many wizarding families could not, but their wealth paled in comparison to the fortune the Malfoys or the Parkinsons had accumulated over the years. But Cygnus Greengrass had worked hard in the magical world, and when aided by Althea Greengrass's sharp wit and business acumen, had made a name for themselves in the pureblood circles. However, that in itself, was a problem. As a sort of nouveau riche, their every action was scrutinized by the older families, and the faintest of misdeeds could be used to tarnish the Greengrass name. Even a small, minor infraction against pureblood tradition could cause

Cygnus to lose customers, something their small, but profitable business could not afford.

"I think it has something to do with my ancestors. Something way back down our line. Something only Malfoy's father could've dug up."

"Bastard," Blaise spat.

"Git," Tracey agreed.

The Ice Queen smiled thinly at her friends.

The doors to the dungeon opened with a clang. The three swiveled in their chairs to see their head of house stalk in, his robes billowing out from behind him. The man scanned the empty commons sourly before noticing them.

"Greengrass. Davis. Zabini," Snape snapped, "What are the three of you doing up so late?"

Tracey, the more talkative of their group, spoke up in defense.

"It's Daphne, sir. She's-mmph!"

The Ice Queen kept her hand firmly clamped over her friend's mouth. Snape was someone whom she respected but did not trust, and she would rather die than let her secret get out, or even worse, taken advantage of. The potions master narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"What is it Miss Greengrass? You know better than to hide things from me."

"It's nothing professor," she said curtly, and when Tracey made to argue, she poked her hard in the ribs, "We were just discussing the latest potions assignment."

From the disbelieving stare Snape was giving her, Daphne knew the man did not buy her excuse.

"I am well aware of your better than average performance in my class, Miss Greengrass" their head of house remarked dryly, "But I do not delude myself in thinking the subject I teach warrants



discussion at twelve o' clock at night," Snape smirked, "Try again. Truthfully this time."

Daphne refused and instead looked down.

"Very well," Snape glowered when the three kept their silence, "I will not push the issue. But know this. While I may not care for you as McGonagall does to her pet lions or Sprout to her spineless badgers, it is still my duty to keep the lot of you safe. If it is truly something that you cannot handle, you may come to me and I will see to the best of my abilities that things are taken care of."

The man gave them one final look before swiveling on his heel and stalking towards his quarters.

"Daphne," Blaise hissed, "Snape might be your only chance."

"Daphne, please..." Tracey pleaded.

The Ice Queen of Slytherin swallowed.

"Professor."

Snape halted in his tracks, and slowly turned to regard her.

"Miss Greengrass."

"What do you know of arranged marriages?"

The potion master's face twisted into one of incredulity. Whatever the man had expected of her, this certainly wasn't it.

"Arranged marriages fell out of fashion nearly a century ago," Snape glared at the trio, "Some older families may still introduce potential partners to each other, but the final say is left for the couple to decide. There has been talk of banning it in the Wizengamot altogether, but Fudge and the more conservative purebloods have shot down any attempts for the last few years," their head of house frowned, "Why would you ask this question?" then the man's eyes widened, "Unless..."

"Yes," Daphne said simply.

"To who?" Snape snapped.

She gave him a hostile look.

"Your godson."

Their head of house turned chalk white. In three swift strides he was before their table, hands clutched tight into fists.

"Show me," he growled.

Daphne presented the letter with its envelope attached. They were snatched from her hand instantly. Snape's eyes were narrow slits as he regarded the contents. Then, they widened. Just three words, but the meaning was clear. The potions professor handed the letter back to her, his earlier aloofness gone.

"My condolences, Miss Greengrass," he said quietly.

Daphne looked up. Snape's eyes had softened, even if his face had not.

"Thank you professor," she whispered back.

The man nodded stiffly.

"Cygnus would not have done this voluntarily," Daphne thought it rather generous for Snape to defend her father, "He must have been forced into it. Your father is a good man, Miss Greengrass. One of the few out there."

"I know," she replied sadly.

"Is there anything we can do, professor?" Tracey asked desperately. Blaise remained silent, but watched their head of house fervently.

"I'm afraid not," Snape looked pained, honestly pained, and Daphne was grateful for that at the very least, "This has Lucius written all over it. And knowing Lucius, he would have left no loopholes."

"This is the twentieth century," Blaise gritted his teeth, "We're supposed to be modern. Arranged marriages aren't supposed to

exist anymore. For Merlin's Sake, even the muggles have stopped doing it!"

"It's not even an arranged marriage!" Tracey cried out, "It's a contract for a second wife! Daphne's being bartered like she's chattel!"

Snape grimaced.

"I had hoped my godson would never follow Lucius's path. I had hoped Narcissa would ingrain some semblance of morals into that boy. I had hoped Hogwarts would cause Draco to see things aren't so black and white as his father often implies. But it appears that my hopes were in vain," the Slytherin head of house drew a long, shuddering breath, as though if dreading to say what the next few words, "Do you know why Draco decided on this all of a sudden?"

Daphne smiled bitterly. It was clear to her why Malfoy had chosen this course of action. Ever since he had tried courting Fleur Delacour and failed spectacularly, his pride had smarted. It was a childish, juvenile thing, but Daphne did not doubt for a minute that Draco was either.

"The Beauxbatons witch."

Snape's grimace became a glower.

"Jealousy? Is that the reason?"

She nodded.

The potions professor closed his eyes and his nostrils flared. The three Slytherins shifted uneasily in their chairs. It was rare for their head of house to display any facial emotion besides his permanent sneer. It was as though the man was trying hard to swallow his anger. At least, that's what it looked like for a second. When Snape opened his eyes, his face became impassive, hard to read, and the leer that haunted the dreams of Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors alike spread back across his features.

"I will see what I can do, Miss Greengrass," he said, "I will go to the headmaster. Perhaps even persuade Lucius from this madness. But do not hope. It can lead to disappointment."

"Thank you, professor," Daphne said, and meant it this time.

"It's all the purebloods' fault!" Tracey growled, "All their stupid traditions! All their stupid customs! All their stupid ways!"

"Need I remind you, Miss Davis," Snape remarked softly, "that both your friends are purebloods. Did you forget that in your anger?"

Tracey looked ashamed.

"No, but Daphne and Blaise are different..."

"There are purebloods," Snape said simply, "And there are purebloods. Do not mistake one for the other."

"Yes sir," the girl answered obediently, but her tone sounded far from convinced.

The potions master ignored Tracey and turned back to Daphne.

"In the meantime I will attempt to steer Draco," the way Snape spat the name made Daphne feel a stab of vindictive glee, "from claiming early what he no doubt thinks is his by right. It will be a simple task, as much as I would rather think otherwise. We can thank Merlin the boy has not inherited Lucius's cunning."

"Thank you, professor," the Ice Queen said for the final time.

Their head of house nodded curtly before giving the trio a measuring look. It was as though he was trying to figure out something supportive to say but could not quite put it into words.

"Good luck," Snape finally settled on, and then was gone.

Fleur tried hard not to look excited. She really did, but the air of enthusiasm that had settled over the Great Hall was contagious. It was the Champion's Feast, after all, where who would represent their respective schools would finally be determined. Hogwarts had been decorated heavily for the affair, and the halls were bursting with banners of the four houses as well as the emblems of the guest schools. The festive mood that had lingered all morning had only

grown stronger as the day wore on. Now, with evening steadily encroaching, the excitement had reached a fever pitch.

Seated at the Ravenclaw table, Fleur was in the middle of the festive storm. She heard loud laughter, proud boasts, and excited chatter, all coming together to form a cacophony of noise. Roger Davis was bragging to a gaggle of third years on the deeds he would do if he was selected as champion. Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecombe were giggling as they scanned the Hufflepuff table. A boy she didn't know was telling a joke to an already laughing audience. And this was from the house that was usually quiet and reserved. The tumult they made was a pale comparison to the tempest of sound that came from the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs.

The Beauxbatons students, in contrast, were silent and subdued. They talked quietly amongst themselves, but rarely did they raise their voice. That did not mean they weren't thrilled, however. The quarter-Veela could see the excitement dancing in her classmates' eyes.

The Slytherins were the only ones that seemed to be completely quiet. Fleur's gaze flickered over to their table to see those that were talking were doing so in hunched circles. The rest just stared at the Goblet of Fire that rested on a raised dais in front of the staff table. The Durmstrang contingent that sat with them did not look at all unnerved by their hosts' unnatural silence. In fact, they seemed to fit right in, with their dour faces and sullen attitudes.

As her eyes travelled down the Slytherin table, they stopped and narrowed when a blonde boy smiled winningly at her. She recalled him as the idiot with the two lackeys that had tried to court her earlier in the year. His name escaped her, and Fleur did not try too hard to remember it. He was one of those fools that believed she could be moved by money and riches. The quarter-Veela's gaze swept over the rest of the Slytherins and smirked inwardly when she noticed the boy's smile had become an ugly scowl at being ignored.

It just reinforced the fact that not all men were noble as her father. Or Bayard for that matter.

Fleur's face had grown from excited to impassive as she watched the Slytherins. Now, as she thought about her bodyguard, her face became flushed.

Training with Bayard had proved to be a challenging affair. The boy was a remorseless teacher. Spells she shot at him he rebounded with the intent to injure. Curses that flew from her wand were returned with equal vigor and greater power. Jinxes and hexes, small but useful tools in the duelist's arsenal, were dispelled by a flick of his wand and then turned back to haunt her. And that was only when he decided to remain at range.

It was when he decided that close combat was more suitable for the occasion that then the quarter-Veela truly knew pain. The handsome face smiling that charming smile, all the while blurring in movements nearly too fast to see. And the hands. Jabbing towards her vulnerable body, slapping aside her hasty wand motions, and weaving past her pitiful attempts to defend herself.

Fleur shuddered. She had many fears in her childhood, some that she still held on to, but none so completely terrified her more than Bayard closing the distance.

In spite of this, Fleur found herself thriving under the brutal regimen. She had always been one to push herself beyond everyone else's expectations. Her Veela heritage had gifted her with an appearance that was almost otherworldly in magnificence. Men saw a breathtakingly beautiful woman when they looked at her. Women saw a breathtakingly beautiful woman that wanted their men. But that was the problem. They never saw beyond her beauty. Never took the time to know what made her Fleur Delacour.

She wanted to prove them wrong. To show that she was more than just a pretty face. It was why she had come with the hopes of participating in the Triwizard Tournament. To prove to the world that there was skill behind her beauty. And so, she had thrived.

Every time Bayard sent her to the ground in an undignified heap, she picked herself back up. Every time her bodyguard blasted apart her Protego, she would conjure a new one. And every time the boy charged at her with the intent to melee, she would attempt a desperate defense before falling and getting back up again. She had come to the sessions expecting sweet words and roses, but had instead received sweat and tears.

And she wouldn't have it any other way.

Fleur was content. With the way the boy taught her. With her improving, albeit slow progress. The only thing that would make her more content was if those training sessions belonged to her and her alone.

Fleur scowled slightly as she glanced back. The target of her displeasure met her gaze for a moment and then looked elsewhere. The witch's body did not mirror the motion.

Lotus stood rigidly to attention, back ramrod straight, head erect, hand clasped over the hilt of her sword as she hovered protectively behind the quarter-Veela. The Oriental woman looked out of place amongst the tables filled with chattering students, with her heavy combat robes and statuesque air. Fleur caught more than a few curious stares focusing on the bounty hunter, though not all of them contained the same innocence. Many of the boys that had once looked at her like she was some sort of prize to be won were now gazing in open admiration at the Asian witch. The quarter-Veela could see why. The woman's hair had been brushed to a glossy sheen, and when added to her exquisite features and porcelain-like skin, made her exotic to look upon.

There had been some arguments, of course, of having a bounty hunter turned bodyguard roaming the halls of Hogwarts. The aurors, surprisingly, had been the most vocal against the decision, stating that the protection of the Tournament, which included her by default, was solely their responsibility. In response, Bayard merely had to point out the near successful kidnapping that occurred on their watch for the complaints to subside. In the end, it was a moot point. Both Dumbledore and Madam Maxime had agreed that an extra layer of protection in the form of the redeemed mercenary would be beneficial in the long run.

It was a logical decision, and one that Fleur agreed with. That didn't mean she had to like it, however. The woman persistently shadowed her, went wherever she went, and had gone so far as to take up residence in a spare room in the Beauxbatons chariot that the quarter-Veela's headmistress had thoughtfully provided. It was annoying to the extreme, and the only reason Fleur had managed to keep her temper from fraying was Lotus herself. The Asian witch looked highly uncomfortable whenever she followed her; guilty even,

and for all her misgivings towards the woman, Fleur had to admit she possessed an extraordinary moral compass.

The quarter-Veela stowed away these thoughts later. Tonight was a night for celebration, if not for herself then for her classmate selected to be champion.

Fleur turned in her seat to see her bodyguard staring intently at the Goblet of Fire. She leaned in towards him, delighting at the new-found closeness their training had caused.

"Is something wrong?" she asked in French.

The boy looked back, and the quarter-Veela noticed with some trepidation his usual smile was not in place. Bayard looked serious, from the way his lips formed a tight line across his face to the way his usually bright eyes were now as hard as stone.

"I have a feeling," her bodyguard replied slowly in the same language, "that something bad is going to happen."

Fleur's excitement waned, replaced by alarm. It was a testament to the quality of Bayard's instruction that she immediately began to scan the Great Hall for potential threats. Her eyes darted back and forth, but she could find nothing.

"Do you think it is more bounty hunters?"

The boy gave her a brief look of approval. Fleur felt her heart flutter slightly.

"No. Not anything like that," her bodyguard mused, "It is too soon for another attempt. But it is something we should watch out for nonetheless," Bayard blinked and then stabbed at his dinner with his fork, "No. This is something different. I just have a feeling. A sixth sense, if you will."

At the start of the term, Fleur would have huffed at the thought of anyone capable of breaching the wards and auror guard of Hogwarts. Now, after her attempted kidnapping and with the boy's keen training, she had learned to err on the safe side of caution. Bayard's warning set her on edge, and caused the quarter-Veela to finger her wand beneath the table.



The boy noticed the motion, and the smile that had been absent on his face reappeared in all its charm. His hand crept under the table and wrapped around hers. Fleur felt the flutter in her heart become a hammering beat.

"You're learning fast," he winked.

"T-Thank you," she said back.

The boy squeezed gently, reassuringly, and whatever worries the quarter-Veela held were washed away in an instant.

"I will always protect you, Miss Delacour," Bayard said softly.

Fleur accidentally dropped her wand. Her bodyguard gave her an amused look before letting go of her hand to pick it up. The quarter-Veela cursed herself for being so clumsy. If she hadn't let go, perhaps the boy would have held her hand longer.

The boy winked at her again.

"Just focus on the tournament," he whispered and planted her wand back into her palm, "I'll take care of everything else."

Fleur nodded dumbly. Her hand burned.

Bayard went back to staring at the goblet, and the quarter-Veela copied the action, just in time to see it spew out a piece of crumpled paper amid a flare of purplish flames. The clamor in the Great Hall abruptly died, and eager gazes fixed themselves to the garishly dressed frame of Albus Dumbledore. The old headmaster's eyes twinkled as he straightened out the parchment to read. Some of the students who had the misfortune of being seated at the very end of the hall were standing up to see who the first champion would be.

"Viktor Krum."

A wave of drumming noises came from the Slytherin side of the Great Hall as the Durmstrang contingent pounded their fists into the table. Their new champion, a tall, sallow young man with dark hair and narrow, glaring eyes stood up from his seat. Fleur recognized him from some quidditch posters she had seen before. Some of the

Beauxbatons students were diehard fans of the sport, and a few had pasted giant moving pictures of their favorite stars in their rooms in the carriage. The quarter-Veela was not one of those few. She had no liking for quidditch, much to her father's disappointment. Neither did Gabrielle, for that matter, and Sebastian had always lamented that he had no sons to play the sport with. Fleur smiled slightly at the memory. For all his political mongering, Sebastian Delacour was a father first and foremost.

Krum walked past the still celebrating forms of his cohorts and made his way to the Champion's Room at the end of the Great Hall. Fleur noted that for all his supposed grace while on a broomstick, the Durmstrang champion seemed clumsy on land. It looked like he was almost waddling when he walked.

"Krum eh?" Claire said to Aimeric from the opposite side of the table, "I hear he knows a nasty set of curses. He could be tough competition."

The pureblood nodded studiously.

"The Goblet of Fire will only choose ze best. I welcome the chance to test my skills against him."

"The Triwizard Tournament has not had a duel between champions as an event for some two hundred years," Bayard's eyes were still on the goblet as he spoke, "Chances are you won't see that set of curses anytime soon."

Aimeric rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Claire chuckled softly to herself and nudged the pureblood.

"Don't look so disappointed, Aimeric," Fleur's best friend smiled winningly, "I'm sure zere will be other events you can test your mettle in."

"I suppose so," the quarter-Veela noted that Aimeric did look disappointed, "But I was still looking forward to a duel between champions. Even if I was not selected to be one."

"Don't worry, Aimeric," Luna chirped from Fleur's side, "I'll let you duel my Wrackspurt."

As always when the petite Ravenclaw spoke, a moment of silence descended among the Beauxbatons students. Then Claire giggled and Aimeric let out a shaky chuckle. Despite herself, Fleur's lips quirked upwards in a small smile. Even when the air was thick with tension and excitement, Luna could still produce laughs.

"Hush," a boy in Beauxbatons uniform reprimanded mildly, "Ze goblet is going to choose ze next champion!"

Fleur immediately snapped her head towards the front of the hall, where Dumbledore was waiting patiently for the next slip of paper. He didn't have to wait long. A loud bang and the Goblet of Fire lit up again in magical flames. The old wizard reached out towards the dangling parchment and pulled it out of the air. Fleur squinted her eyes. Was it hers? The headmaster smiled benignly at the silence.

"Fleur Delacour."

At once the Ravenclaw table all turned to look at her. The quarter-Veela felt her face flush from the attention. The Beauxbatons contingent, Claire, Aimeric, and Bayard included, rose from their seats and started applauding. Fleur rose as well, though a bit jerkily. Luna smiled dreamily up at her and began clapping as well. The quarter-Veela smiled back. The rest of the Ravenclaws followed Luna's lead and was in turn, followed by the rest of the Great Hall.

The ovation she was receiving was supposed to be music to her ears. It was not. Instead, Fleur felt a sudden pang of apprehension well up in her breast. She was now the Champion of Beauxbatons, and with that title came great responsibilities. The rest of her classmates was now rooting for her and hoping she would bring honor and glory to France. Her headmistress, a woman who had been both a close family friend and a personal one as well, would be expecting the best from her. Claire, Aimeric, even Bayard, would be watching her, cheering for her as the tournament wore on.

What if she failed? A knot of fear formed in the quarter-Veela's stomach. What if she failed them? There was supposed to be three tasks to the tournament. What if she messed up on one? Or even worse, on all three? Would they still be her friends? Would they treat her the same way as before? It was a nauseating thought, and Fleur soon found her mind clouded by doubt.

For a moment, the quarter-Veela regretted being named champion.

A warm presence touched her hand, and she instinctively drew closer to it, seeking its comfort. The quarter-Veela turned to see her bodyguard smiling at her, his fingers once again wrapped around her own.

"Do not fear Miss Delacour," he leaned in close to whisper, "Do not falter. Your friends are with you."

Fleur looked back to the Beauxbatons students. Claire was tearing up as she clapped, a happy grin on her face. Aimeric looked slightly wistful, but his features were alight in a proud smile as well. The rest of the Beauxbatons contingent looked equally proud, and the quarter-Veela realized suddenly that they were proud of her. Proud of her skills, and proud of her courage. Proud at her being recognized as their champion. They had placed their confidence in her, knowing that she was the best of them, and were not ashamed to admit it.

Fleur felt her own confidence grow. She glanced shyly at her bodyguard. The boy's smile was genuine this time. There was no dazzling show of teeth or a charm-filled grin. He was honestly happy for her.

"I'm with you," he said simply, and let his hand fall. Fleur caught it.

"Zank you," she said and squeezed back.

Dumbledore smiled as the Beauxbatons witch rose from her seat with as much elegance as she could muster. Outwardly she appeared calm and collected, but the aged Headmaster could see the excitement burning in her eyes. Dumbledore's smile grew as she seemed to linger by Harry before moving towards the Champion's Room. Perhaps this young lady would be the one that brought the boy out of his shell.

Further down the table, the old wizard caught Lily staring at the disguised Harry longingly. It had been weeks since the incident at the welcoming ceremony, but the woman still occasionally stole glances at the boy. Albus knew mentally she was comparing him to how Harry would have looked were he his age. The aged wizard felt a stab of guilt that he had not told his Muggle Studies professor the

truth that lay in plain sight. But it was what Harry wanted, and Dumbledore would not fail him again.

Albus turned his attention back to the Goblet of Fire, which had started shaking again on the raised dais. A flare of flames lit along the goblet's edges and soon after, a folded piece of parchment spat from its rimmed mouth. Dumbledore reached out serenely and unfolded it. The Headmaster beamed.

"Cedric Diggory," he said.

The Hufflepuff table exploded into cheers. The newly-chosen Hogwarts champion rose from his seat, a shocked grin on his face. The seventh year's fellow students pounded his back and slapped his shoulders. Some were even dancing with joy. Back at the staff table, Sprout was dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief McGonagall had lent her. Both women looked proud.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. It was good to see a champion come from Hufflepuff. The house had been misaligned in the past as a place for the lazy and the apathetic. It was no small secret that many of the first years held high aspirations to be placed in Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, or even Slytherin, but none wanted to be in Hufflepuff. It was a prestige issue, Albus guessed. Gryffindor produced brave and courageous heroes. Ravenclaw sponsored some of the best scholars in the wizarding world. Slytherin spawned men and women of ambition who rose to great heights of political power. Hufflepuff really had no noteworthy attributes to its name, besides loyalty, and that to many people, meant lackeys. It was not true of course, but Dumbledore had long ago learned that the perception of the masses was a hard thing to change. Perhaps the choosing of Cedric as champion would be the catalyst of that change.

Cedric gave a rather shaky smile to the rest of his table before walking jerkily towards the Champion's Room. Dumbledore didn't blame him. The boy must be feeling as though the entire world was on his shoulders. Not only was he carrying Hogwarts' hopes with him, but Hufflepuff's as well.

The Hogwarts Champion disappeared from view and Dumbledore clapped his hands together.

"Excellent," he said cheerily, "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you to give those who have been selected every ounce of support you can muster. We-"

A bang-like noise erupted from the Goblet of Fire. Albus turned to the magical artifact, momentarily confused.

The unthinkable happened.

The Goblet of Fire flashed, spewing out a gout of brilliant purple fire. Dumbledore's reaction was quick, even in his shocked state. The aged headmaster's hand shot out and grasped the piece of parchment that had suddenly materialized. The Great Hall had grown silent in the meantime. Every eye seemed to stare at the Goblet of Fire. For good reason. It had just chosen a fourth champion.

He unfolded the parchment with trembling hands. The old wizard dreaded whose name would appear. Pleaded to the Fates that it wasn't going to be who he thought it would be.

No, thought Albus as his eyes roamed over the parchment. Not him. Not this way.

But the letters that was inscribed in flowing, idyllic text was unmistakable. It seemed to taunt him with the impossibility of it all. A part of him marveled that just this single piece of paper would turn so many people's lives upside down. The rest of him just felt old.

"Headmaster?" McGonagall had half risen from her seat, a look of concern on her face, "Who is it?"

Albus Dumbledore took a deep, steady breath.

"Harry Potter."

The silence that followed was thunderous. It lasted, if only for a moment. A dull thudding sound broke it. Every eye turned to the Ravenclaw table.

Bayard had stabbed his fork into the table.

Blink.

Pause.

Blink.

My senses return. I realize my hand is still gripping the fork. I release it. The handle is bent.

My hand twitches. Spasms. I watch, mortified, as my fingers refuse to obey my commands. I ball them into a fist and clench tight. The fingernails dig deep in my palm and draws blood.

The pain brings clarity. The pain brings focus. My hand stops twitching. That is good I suppose.

I am surprised. I am surprised at the anger I feel. I had thought I was above such things. I'm not supposed to feel. I am supposed to be emotionless. But the fierce swell that howls within me is something I cannot deny. I want to spit. I want to curse. I want to rage at the heavens for this cruel fate.

I do none of the above. I just smile.

They are all looking at me now, I realize. Every student at the Ravenclaw table. The French. The English. Staring at me and the fork I have slammed deep into the table.

My hand threatens to twitch again. My smile falters.

The anger is a wrathful, bestial thing. Crashing against the walls I have so carefully built up. Demanding to be released. Desperate to see the light of day.

"Bayard?" Claire whispers my name. There is both fear and concern in her voice.

I try to smile again. It comes out as a mixture of a grimace and a leer. Claire shrinks back. Now there is only fear.

I stand up. The motion seems to take forever. I turn from the table. Every eye is upon me now. The entirety of the Great Hall. Staring at me with fearful gazes.

My first step is hesitant. But the second step is not. I begin to walk.

"Mister Bayard," Madam Maxime's voice halts me, "Where are you going?"

I turn to regard her. Her regal face is alarmed, afraid even.

I am so tempted to return to my seat. So tempted to sit back down and pretend nothing has happened. It is almost better to lose my magic than unveil my face to them. Almost.

Instead, I will my glamours away. I feel the slight tingling on my skin as the persona that is Bayard, like so many others before it, disappears.

The intake of breaths is like a howling wind.

I see that Maxime's face has turned pale. I see Dumbledore beside her looking old and forlorn. I see McGonagall beside him holding her hand over her chest and taking great, steady gasps. I see Lily looking ready to faint. James gripping the staff table so hard that the wood strains. Sirius beside him staring back at me in horror. Snape looking particularly venomous. A sea of faces. All with the same expressions. Shock. Horror. Fear. And everything in between.

My hand begins twitching again.

"To the Champion's Room," I say and turn away.



## Chapter 12: I Feel Nothing

Fleur Delacour was in a rare happy mood when she entered the Champion's Room. It was relatively dark, with the only source of light coming from the few torches that were affixed to the stone walls. There were no places to sit, and the only other occupant in the room, Viktor Krum, was forced to stand, back slouched against the wall. Overall, it was a rather unwelcome atmosphere that Fleur walked into, but she could have cared less.

The quarter-Veela smiled cheerfully at the Durmstrang champion and received a growl of acknowledgement in return. The quidditch star didn't seem to want to talk so Fleur strode to a wall opposite his and leaned back, content to be lost in her thoughts about a certain green-eyed boy. A dull roar sounded from beyond the room not long after, and tore her from her daydreaming.

"Ze last champion has been selected," she said softly.

Krum grunted in response.

The door opened, and a ruggedly handsome boy strode in, smiling nervously.

"Hello," the boy looked slightly shocked about the whole thing, "I'm Cedric Diggory. Hogwarts's champion."

"Cedric," Fleur nodded politely.

Krum growled something monosyllabic.

"Er... hi," Cedric said back, "It's going to be an honor competing against the two of you."

"I feel ze same way," the quarter-Veela answered, "It will be an honor to compete against ze champions of Hogwarts and Durmstrang."

"Yes," was Krum's entire contribution to the conversation.

In the meantime, the dull roar that had been steadily growing in volume had halted for some reason, replaced by an eerie quiet. Fleur didn't think much of it. Most likely the professors had called for

silence. The three champions stood awhile in the dim room, and all too quickly the silence that had settled became awkward.

"Aren't the tournament officials supposed to be coming in here?" Cedric looked a little unsure of himself, "To congratulate us?"

"I was assuming zat as well."

Krum just scowled at his feet.

"Maybe there was a fourth champion," Cedric joked.

The door slammed open. All three champions jumped. A boy emerged, stepping methodically into the room, lips a tight line of displeasure.

Fleur stared.

The boy looked so like Bayard that Fleur was at first sure he was him. But her bodyguard had blonde hair, and high, regal cheekbones. This boy's hair was jet-black and his face held the tiniest of differences. But the eyes, emerald colored, were unmistakable. Fleur recalled those same eyes looking at her with concern, joy, pride, and even affection in the past few weeks. All those were gone now. Fury, barely-contained wrath, stared back at her, promising pain, agony, death, and perhaps all three.

"Is something the matter?" Cedric spoke up, eyeing the newcomer curiously, "Did they want us to come ou-"

The boy's eyes flashed. Fire smoldered behind the emerald pupils, burning, all-consuming rage, and Cedric's question died on his lips.

"Bayard?" Fleur breathed.

The piercing glare turned back to her, and the quarter-Veela swallowed nervously. Then the boy inclined his head, ever so slightly.

"W-What?" she gasped at her bodyguard, "How... How did zis happen?"

Bayard's smile ceased all pretenses of being a smile. Fleur had never seen a look that cold.

"You're about to find out."

The door to the Champion's Room opened with a bang, and a woman, wild-eyed and desperate, surged in. Fleur recognized the red hair immediately. Lily Potter, Hogwarts' Muggle Studies professor. The woman stood there for a minute, rooted to the spot, her eyes roaming over those in the room before focusing on one particular boy.

"H-Harry?" she whispered, as though afraid the boy would disappear if she spoke too loud, "Harry? Is that you? Is that really you?"

Fleur blinked in astonishment. Her bodyguard did not respond and instead just looked coolly back. Lily gave a cry of joy and sorrow mixed together and rushed forward, arms held out to embrace the boy. The quarter-Veela hastily stepped back. She had no wish to be in front of the woman's crazed charge.

At the last second, bare feet away from those outstretched arms, the boy's eyes narrowed. He flung his own arm outwards and away, and a shimmering wall of magic materialized out of thin air. A Protego, but unlike any other Protego Fleur had ever seen. Her own Shielding Charm was brilliant gold in color, a manifestation of her will to protect herself and those dear to her. Her father's was silver in hue, a barrier of glittering light that was eager to shield its caster. All the Protegos she had encountered ranged from gold to silver to bronze, noble colors that were created with the intent to protect. This one was an angry red.

The barrier shone with the color of human blood, a vivid, intense crimson that seemed almost otherworldly bright in hue. Across its seamless surface, garlands of magic leapt and danced, cackling tendrils of energy that hissed like angry serpents. This was not a shield created for the purposes of protection, Fleur realized. This was raw, angry emotion, a pulsating, living thing that was a grotesque caricature of what a real Protego should be. And the boy had produced it without word or wand.

Lily ran full tilt into the shield. The barrier hissed and a tendril of its body lashed out like a whip. The woman cried out in pain. She

stumbled back, her eyes wide in shock, an ugly welt marring the skin of her previously untouched arm.

"Harry?" Lily breathed.

The boy stared back.

"Get away from me."

The woman shrank back at the words, and Fleur knew instinctively that what Bayard had said hurt far more than what the Protego had done.

The door slammed open again, this time revealing a handsome man with messy black hair and hazel eyes. One of the auror captains. Husband to Lily Potter. James, if Fleur recalled correctly.

"Lily!" the man ground to a halt when he saw his wife holding her injured arm, "Harry!" he shouted when he saw the boy behind the hissing, spitting shield, "Lily!" he cried out again when he realized that the shield was responsible for his wife's state of distress.

"James!" Lily sobbed as her husband embraced her, "It's really him! It's really, really him!"

"Harry?" the man turned from soothing his wife, "Son?"

The boy's Protego hissed threateningly.

"I," Bayard's voice in comparison was perfectly composed, perfectly even, "have not been your son for a very long time, James."

The auror captain's eyes widened, and Lily all but sank in his arms.

"What do you mean?" James stumbled over the words, "You're Harry aren't you? You're our son!"

"Perhaps you have misunderstood," the boy said smoothly, his features schooled permanently into a smiling mask, "Allow me to elucidate what I have said into something even your simple mind can understand," Bayard bared his teeth. The smile grew wider, "I am not your son. I have never been your son. And I certainly do not want to be your son."

Lily gave a wail of misery.

"He hates us James!" she cried into her husband's shoulder, "He hates us!"

Before the auror could respond, a boy burst through the door, clad in Gryffindor robes.

"Harry!" he called out, "Merlin, is that really you Harry? It's me, Adam!"

To Fleur's stunned eyes, the Protego grew an even angrier shade of crimson.

"And now the circle has become complete," Bayard continued to smile, but Fleur could see the bitterness behind his eyes.

"Harry! What's wrong!" Adam stood hovering near his parents, looking torn between wanting to stay with them and getting to the boy behind the shield.

"It is quite clear to me what is wrong... brother."

The way Bayard's tone had turned from cool to mocking at the last word made Adam flinch and look away.

"It was you, wasn't it, last night," the Gryffindor swallowed and met the boy's eyes once again, "When I talked about what happened. That was you listening. You heard every word."

"Yes. I did."

"Then why didn't you say anything!" Adam challenged.

"It was amusing to see you wallow in your guilt," Bayard replied evenly, "even if it was fake. You should consider being an actor, Adam. I was almost convinced."

"That wasn't an act!" the Gryffindor cried out, desperate, "It's how we really feel!" he swallowed again, "For what's its worth, Harry, I'm sorry. We're all sorry."

Both James and Lily looked at the boy hopefully. Fleur felt a stab of pity for them, even if she didn't fully understand the situation. Her bodyguard closed his eyes, his face turned peaceful, and for a moment, the quarter-Veela thought he was going to forgive them. And then the eyes snapped open, and within them, the rage continued to burn.

"Your apology to me," the boy said softly, "is nothing but dust and ashes."

All three Potters recoiled, as though physically struck. They didn't get the chance to reply. The door to the Champion's Room opened again, slowly this time, and Fleur turned to see the robed frame of Albus Dumbledore striding in. The Headmaster had looked delighted when he was calling names from the goblet. Now, he just looked old. Following him came the quarter-Veela's own headmistress, who had to stoop to get in. Madam Maxime nodded sadly to her before turning her attention to the boy. Behind the tall woman, a host of faces angled in, professors and officials of the tournament, all wearing the same stunned looks.

Fleur wanted to curse them all. They were staring at her bodyguard like he was some exhibition, some sort of weird, unusual thing up for display.

"Simply marvelous!" everyone turned to stare at the portly figure of Ludo Bagman, "Simply magnificent!" the former quidditch player exclaimed, "To think, that the Goblet of Fire would pick not three, but four champions! The very idea is astounding!" the man beamed a bright happy smile, completely out of place among the room full of serious stares, "Oh the Prophet will just eat this up! A young man, driven from his family by grief and despair, hidden among the public to bide his time, now revealed by the goblet for all to see. It reminds me of the time I played with the Wasps in my beginning season!"

Fleur wondered for a moment if the man was stupid.

"Ludo. I believe now is not the time for your reminiscences," a pale looking man with a thin mustache said sternly. He looked like a born politician, a hard-faced one who would refuse to budge on any issue. Someone Sebastian would have loved to deal with, "We have a very serious matter on our hands."

"Now, now Barty," Bagman spoke airily, "Brighten up a little eh? Today should be a day of celebration! The wayward son has finally come back to Magical Britain's Number One Family! The press will have a riot!" the man turned to Bayard, not at all fazed by the glare he was being given, "Harry, was it? Do you play quidditch? Adam is a fine chaser for the Gryffindor team! Perhaps you'll become rivals eh? Find your brotherly love while up in the air with a broom between your legs! It's the stuff of legends I say! Why, it reminds me of the time I met this Swedish fellow while playing at the World's Cup! It was-

"Ludo," Dumbledore said mildly, "Perhaps it would be best for you to remain silent at the moment."

The man choked down the words he was about to utter. Fleur marveled at the sway the seemingly weak and frail headmaster of Hogwarts still held over Britain's magical population. He was a well-known wizard in France, Germany, and maybe even the rest of the world, but here, in his homeland, it seemed that whatever Albus Dumbledore said was taken to be gospel. The quarter-Veela didn't know if that was good or bad.

"Y-Yes," Bagman stammered, "Of course Albus."

The aged wizard turned to her bodyguard, and gestured to the blood red Protego that still shimmered in place.

"Is this really necessary, Harry?"

The boy gazed back evenly.

"That would depend, Headmaster," he inclined his head towards the Potters, "Will you keep them away from me?"

Lily made a noise that sounded like a mixture of a gasp and a whimper. The Potter men just looked stricken.

Dumbledore sighed.

"If that is what it will take."

Bayard nodded. A wave of his hand and the barrier disappeared with one final, threatening hiss. Lily immediately broke free from her husband's hug and made to run for the boy.

"Lily."

The woman halted in her tracks and turned tearfully to the old headmaster.

"But Albus..."

"Please."

The Muggles Studies professor shoulders drooped, and she despondently made her way back into her husband's embrace.

"A wandless Shielding Charm," the man called Barty spoke up, "Silently casted too. That's an impressive work of magic, boy."

Fleur inwardly scoffed. Wait until you see him in a duel.

"Thank you," her bodyguard replied politely, and turned back to staring at Dumbledore.

"Harry," the old headmaster began, "I'm truly sorry that this has happened..."

"Did you put my name into the cup, Dumbledore?"

Fleur gasped. The boy's audacity shocked her. He was fourteen years old, barely a teen, and he had the gall to speak so crudely, so bluntly to a renowned and powerful wizard as Albus Dumbledore. Judging from the expressions of those around her, the quarter-Veela could see they were equally as shocked.

"How dare you!" a man with a hooked nose and greasy black hair was the first to break the silence. Snape. Fleur frowned. She didn't like how the potions professor taught, and the way he would browbeat those students not naturally talented at the subject irked her to no end, "The Headmaster has no need to answer anything you ask!"

"Severus," Dumbledore said in the same tone he had used with Lily.



"Headmaster! Just because he is a Potter spawn doesn't mean you have to bend backwards to accommodate-"

"Severus. Please."

Snape growled out something inaudible, but remained silent. The quarter-Veela noted that both James and Adam were glaring at the professor with something very close to hatred. It seemed that there was bad blood between them.

Dumbledore turned back to the boy, his eyes sincere.

"I did not put your name into the cup, Harry."

Both wizards, young and old, locked gazes for a moment.

"I believe you," her bodyguard said after a while, and broke the connection.

"Thank you, Harry," the aged headmaster nodded gravely.

"Well?" a new voice broke in, "Aren't you going to ask him how he got into the tournament?" Karkaroff's face looked like a wolf that had just found a lost lamb, "The boy must have wormed in somehow."

"He's a Potter," Snape spat, "No doubt he just wanted the fame and glory."

Had Fleur been a full Veela, she was sure she would have turned into an avian and started hurling fireballs at the two men. And even if she had not, then it looked like James and Adam would have done something in her place. The Gryffindor's face had grown red with anger, while his father was now in turn being restrained by Lily as he tried to get at Snape.

"There is no need for that Igor," Dumbledore said serenely, "Because I do not believe Harry put his name into the cup."

"What!" Karkaroff snapped his head in the headmaster's direction, "You cannot be serious, Dumbledore! How else would this boy be named as a champion? He must have cheated the goblet somehow!"

"Igor..."

"This was supposed to be a tournament of goodwill among our schools! But what happens as soon as the goblet is lit? Beauxbatons receives two champions! Where is the sense of goodwill in that, Dumbledore? When one school gets more champions than the other!"

"Headmaster Karkaroff," Madam Maxime's regal voice interrupted, "Bayard is under the age limit zat Dumbley-door has set up. Zis you must admit. He could not have entered ze tournament by himself."

"It does not matter how his name was pulled from the cup," Karkaroff replied glibly, "The fact remains that somehow Beauxbatons has gotten two champions. It is not exactly reasonable for one school to have the same number of champions as the other two combined. Something must be done in the spirit of fairness."

At this, Maxime fell silent and regarded Bayard with a pensive look.

"What do you suggest, Igor?" Dumbledore asked.

"Relight the goblet," the Durmstrang headmaster had developed a superior, smug air, and Fleur found herself disliking the man immensely, "That is the best way. If Beauxbatons can have two champions, than Durmstrang and Hogwarts deserves two as well."

"Impossible," Barty frowned slightly as he spoke, "The Goblet of Fire cannot be relit until the next tournament begins."

"Indeed," Dumbledore added in, "As Mr. Crouch has said, as long as this tournament is in progress, the goblet will remain unlit until another one is begun."

"Then light it forcibly!" Karkaroff scoffed, "I don't care how you do it! As long as it's done so the schools can have the same number of champions!"

"I've always thought you were a cowardly fool, Karkaroff," a man with a patchwork of scars across his face said nastily. Alastor Moody, Fleur realized. Defense of the Dark Arts teacher. The scarred former auror directed his stare at the Durmstrang headmaster, but his

magical eye remained riveted on the impassive form of Bayard, "what, with you joining the Death Eaters. But you still sometimes manage to surprise me with your idiocy," Moody grinned as Karkaroff flinched under his gaze, "The Goblet of Fire cannot be lighted. If you want to force it to light, you're welcome to try. You'll just kill your own champion in the process."

"What?" Karkaroff sputtered.

"The Goblet of Fire is backed by ancient magic," Moody growled, "Once it produces your name, you have to compete. If you somehow find a way to force it to light, it will assume another tournament has begun."

"So what?" the Durmstrang teacher sneered back, "Let another tournament begin then-"

"If another tournament begins, then the goblet will deem the contracts of the original champions to be violated, since they haven't competed in any tasks," Moody spat and Karkaroff's mouth snapped shut, "And in case you were living in a hole for the past few weeks, that means they'll lose their magic," the grizzled auror bared his teeth into another terrifying grin, "I heard it's a real painful way to go. Losing your magic that is."

Fleur nodded stoically to herself. She had been warned of this by Madam Maxime, as had all the Beauxbatons students. It was the one bad thing that marred the tournament. Losing your magic if you backed out. The quarter-Veela did not think it would affect her. She had no reason to forfeit, after all. The other two champions, Viktor and Cedric, looked equally as stoic; no doubt they too had been warned by their respective headmasters.

"I don't like this, Albus," Moody turned to Dumbledore, "Only a powerful Confundus Charm could've made the goblet spit out a fourth name."

"A theory I agree with," the old wizard sighed, "Though the motive I do not know."

"Does it matter?" every head turned to Bayard, who had remained silent while the officials talked, "Their motive?"

"What do you mean Harry?" Dumbledore blinked in surprise, "You don't want to know why your name was put into the goblet?"

"Motive means nothing to me," her bodyguard returned, "Because when I find whoever put my name into the cup, I will kill him," the boy's eyes flickered towards Lily who held a hand to her open mouth, "or her."

Fleur told herself the immense chill that she suddenly felt along her back was due to the temperature in the room, and not from the boy's words. Moody let out a harsh bark of laughter.

"Big words for a child," the auror turned professor grinned, "You've got courage, lad, but don't think that'll save you on the battlefield. I reckon you'll be puking your guts out after your first fight."

Bayard stared levelly back and the grizzled man's grin faltered a bit.

"Alastor Moody," the boy said slowly, pronouncing every syllable deliberately, "I know you. Britain's most renowned auror. Filled half the cells of Azkaban with Death Eaters. Killed men with Unforgiveables when they resisted. You have seen Death. Some might even say you have lived with it," the rage that had once burned like a violent fire in those emerald orbs was now colder than a rampaging snowstorm, "But I wonder, is there more to the rumors? Have you really seen Death, Moody? Do you see it in the eyes of the man you are about to kill? Do you see it grasping out to you whenever a stray curse grazes past? Have you seen it embrace the dying in its welcoming arms? The look on its face when blood and fire consumes all?" the boy smiled, "Do you really know Death, Alastor Moody?"

The ex-auror had stopped grinning. The silence that stretched out for a long moment was made more pronounced by the horrified gazes being directed towards the boy.

"You're insane," the unwelcome voice of Karkaroff broke in, "What sort of madness are you talking about? Death? Blood? Fire? Insanity," the haggard looking man began to laugh. It sounded shrill and afraid to Fleur's ears, "The second Beauxbatons champion is a lunatic."

Both the quarter-Veela and her headmistress growled at that. Maxime looked ready to scold her Durmstrang counterpart when Bayard spoke again.

"Karkaroff. Do us all a favor," the boy said mildly, "Shut up."

Fleur gasped again. Her headmistress looked equally as shocked at this blatant show of disrespect. Dumbledore merely quirked his eyebrows into a bemused expression. Snape's gaze had turned from venomous to measuring, and Krum, the person who should be most insulted at her bodyguard's statements was... smiling? The Durmstrang Champion looked openly amused and was staring at Bayard with something very close to respect.

"You... You dare..." Karkaroff's face was white with rage.

Her bodyguard merely leveled a glare at the man. The quarter-Veela shivered. She knew that glare. It was the type important men used on lesser men. The type that stopped inferior men in their tracks and sent them into a quivering wreck. She had seen her father use it on his political opponents and had seen them wilt under the stern gaze. The one Bayard was using was a magnitude more terrifying.

Karkaroff's protests died into a faint, rasping gurgle. The boy smiled.

"Thank you," he said disarmingly and turned back to Dumbledore, "I am going to assume you wish to see me in your office. To explain to them?"

The aged wizard nodded.

"If you will allow it."

Bayard gave the Potters a frosty look.

"Do I have a choice?"

"You do. But this will be the most expedient way."

Again, the two wizards locked gazes. This time, it was Dumbledore that looked away.

"So be it," the boy said softly.

A sad smile creased over the headmaster's face.

"I am truly sorry, Harry, for things to have turned out this way."

"You aren't the goblet, Headmaster," politeness had crept back into Bayard's tone, though it was cold and cynical, "I do not blame you."

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said sincerely before turning to the rest of the room, "I do believe it is getting very late. It has been a day of excitement for us all, and I think it would be a good idea for our new champions to rest. I am sure their friends wish to congratulate them on their achievements."

"An excellent idea, Albus," Professor McGonagall sounded rather hoarse. She directed a gaze at Cedric, "Mr. Diggory?"

The Hogwarts champion nodded numbly, looking shell-shocked. As he walked towards the door, Cedric gave her bodyguard a suspicious look, which earned him a glower from Fleur in return.

"Viktor," Karkaroff tried his best to look superior. It was a rather pitiful attempt, as the man refused to look Bayard in the eye, "We are leaving."

Krum's smile disappeared, replaced by his usual scowl. He strode past the boy, stopped, and turned.

"Viktor..." Krum ignored his headmaster's warning.

"You will be good opponent," the quidditch star jabbed a finger in her bodyguard's direction, "I look forward to see you perform the tasks."

Bayard inclined his head slightly at this gesture of respect.

Krum flashed him a competitive grin and then stomped for the doorway. The tournament officials and professors did too, muttering amongst themselves. Very soon, all that was left was Fleur, her headmistress, Dumbledore, the Potters, and McGonagall. And of course, Bayard.

"Miss Delacour?" Madam Maxime raised a single eyebrow.

The quarter-Veela gazed back, and hoped her headmistress would understand. She apparently did. The giant woman nodded stiffly and then bent her head to exit the room.

"I will see you shortly, Harry," Dumbledore said solemnly when Madam Maxime left.

Her bodyguard ignored him and directed another hostile glare at the Potters. They all looked away in shame.

"Albus..." Lily whispered.

"You will get your explanation in time, Lily," the old wizard returned, and walked for the door. The Potters followed hesitantly, and cast longing glances back into the room before they disappeared completely through the doorway. And then, it was just Fleur and the boy.

The two stood in awkward silence for a while.

"So it is now Harry is it?" she said in French.

Bayard's lips twitched slightly in displeasure.

"If you want it to be," the boy replied smoothly.

The quarter-Veela gave a faltering smile.

"I am not sure what to think. And I am not sure what all this means..." Fleur stared at her bodyguard hopefully, "But I know one thing," she swallowed, "I want to know."

"You... want to know?" Bayard repeated, looking mildly surprised.

"Yes. I do."

"And why do you want to know, Miss Delacour?"

"I just do," it was a lame reason, and Fleur knew it. The boy merely cocked an eyebrow.

"You do understand that if you were to know, your perceptions of me might change."

"Yes. But it won't. My perception of you won't change."

"Why not?"

Fleur matched her bodyguard's stare evenly.

"Because some feelings never change."

"Why are they here?" were the first words Harry Potter uttered when he entered the Headmaster's office.

Dumbledore's eyes flickered towards the other figures in the room besides the Potters. Both Moody and Snape were scowling, for different reasons he was sure. Minerva was trying hard to look stern and failing as she directed compassionate looks towards the boy. Sirius appeared unusually solemn, and had placed a firm hand over James's shoulder. Flitwick looked excited and was squeaking something into Sprout's ear who was looking lost and to the old wizard's mild surprise, angry.

"For the very same reason Miss Delacour is here, I assume."

The Beauxbatons witch flushed slightly at the attention, and despite the situation, Albus smiled slightly. If only this was under different circumstances.

"Fair enough," was the simple response.

Harry stalked to a halt, face a mask of calm ease. Dumbledore noticed his hand was twitching.

"I see that my dear brother has declined to participate in this affair," the emerald eyes settled unblinkingly over James and Lily. It was Lily that answered.

"We... We didn't want Adam to hear this..."

"I am not surprised," the boy drawled, "The two of you have always kept him from the slightest of dangers. I have always wondered just how far you are willing to go to spoil him."



"We haven't spoiled him!" James looked momentarily flustered. Then, his eyes met Harry's, and the auror captain deflated like a balloon, "We haven't spoiled him for a long time," he whispered.

"Only when I was there, I see," Harry smiled. All the adult in the room except Moody shifted uncomfortably.

"Have... Have you been well, Harry?"

The boy looked amused.

"Is that a serious question?"

Lily blinked in surprise.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"You are asking me, someone you have not seen for years, someone you thought possibly dead, who has finally appeared, forcibly I might add, and the first question that comes from your mouth is 'Have you been well?'" Lily stared down in embarrassment. Harry grinned ferally. "Very well. I will answer your question. I have been well, Lily," the grin disappeared, "No thanks to you."

Lily stifled a sob.

"Harry," James began hesitantly, "You shouldn't speak to her that way. She's your mother."

"I have no mother," the boy returned without a shred of doubt, "I have no father. I have no brother."

James's face contorted into a grimace of anguish. Sirius's grip on his shoulder became painfully tight. Dumbledore sighed sadly.

"Perhaps, Harry, an explanation is in order?"

Harry smiled coldly.

"Is this going to be another interrogation, Headmaster?"

Now, it was Sirius's turn to look pained.

"No, of course not," Albus amended, "But still, there is a story to be told, and I think we would all like to hear it. It is up to you, Harry. Perhaps start from the beginning?"

"I am quite sure you know what the beginning is like."

Dumbledore winced and inwardly cursed his choice of words.

"I am sorry Harry," the old wizard said slowly, "And had I known what would have happened, I would have done my best to set things right," the Headmaster took his moon-shaped spectacles off and rubbed his eyes tiredly, "But alas, I allowed my better judgment to be clouded and assumed everything would be fine in the end... You were my favorite of the twins, you know," Dumbledore heard Lily gasp out loud, but he ignored it. Sometimes, the truth hurt, and he suspected what Harry would say to his parents would hurt far more, "Adam was headstrong and brave, a born Gryffindor. You were the same, but with that courage came cunning and intelligence, as well as a tenacity I am ashamed to say would not have been revealed if all this had not happened. I daresay you would have fit well in all four houses here, Harry. Even Slytherin."

"I know Headmaster," the boy replied coolly, "And it is out of my respect for you that I am here."

"I am grateful for that, Harry."

Harry merely stared back.

"Where would you like me to begin?"

Albus was about to say something when Lily interrupted.

"Please, Harry. Tell me why you left."

The boy regarded his mother for a moment. Dumbledore didn't miss how the twitching in his hand had suddenly gotten worse.

"I think you already know the answer to that question."

"I do..." Lily was trying hard not to cry, and was biting her lip to do so, "I do. But I need to hear it from you."

"If that is what you wish," Harry smiled but his eyes darkened, "I left because I hated you, Lily."

The woman staggered back as though physically struck, and it was only because of James's intervention that she did not fall to the floor.

"You don't mean that!" the auror's voice was panicked as he held his wife, "Tell me you don't mean that!"

"I meant every word, James. Down to last syllable. I hate you. I hate your wife. And I hate Adam."

Both Flitwick and Sprout stifled gasps. McGonagall hovered between looking scandalized and looking grim. Moody continued to scowl. Sirius was clenching his fists now that James had moved to support Lily. And Snape. Dumbledore frowned. Snape looked confused. As though if not quite sure what to make of the boy. All these responses failed to match Lily's however, and the aged wizard felt a deep sadness in his heart when his Muggles Studies professor burst into tears.

"Why?" James breathed as he stared wide-eyed at his son.

"Why? Are you purposely being dull, James?" Harry continued to smile, "You, more than any other, should know the reason why. You praised Adam for everything he did, no matter how small it was. No matter how insignificant the task, it was always 'great job son' or 'you make me proud son'. Adam could have walked down the stairs and you would praise him as though he won an Order of Merlin. I wonder James, did you ever think that perhaps Adam was not your only son? That perhaps, you had another, sitting in the shadows, hoping to be acknowledged? That just a single word, a single look even, would mean the world to him?" the boy balled his hand into a fist. That stopped the twitching, if only just, "But you didn't. You could spend hours on end talking about quidditch to Adam, but you couldn't spare a single glance for Harry. Well, you've had your chance. That boy waiting in the shadows is gone now. Dead. And in his place, I am here, and forever I will be."

The auror captain looked sick to his core. Beside him, Lily stopped crying when Harry's eyes found her.

"And you, Lily," the boy's face was still locked into a smiling mask, "The supposedly perfect mother. Everyone called you that. And I agree. You were the perfect mother. To Adam. But not to me. No. Never me. Never Harry. You doted on him while I watched. You cared for him while I stared from the shadows. You hugged him every chance you got while I sat alone. And the looks you gave him. Whenever Adam was in your sight. They disgusted me. Do you know why Lily?" the woman shook her head numbly, "Because I knew that you would never look at me the same way. They sickened me because no matter what I did, I would never be equal to Adam in your eyes. If you had taken a single moment to look away, perhaps you would have discovered a lonely boy looking back at you, waiting for just a single sign of acknowledgement. And perhaps things would have been different. But I doubt it. I really do. Now, it no longer matters. The boy who longed for your attention is gone. Instead of him, I am here, and I can tell you without a doubt he won't ever be coming back."

Lily whimpered.

"Harry..." she whispered beseechingly and stretched out a trembling hand towards the boy.

Harry stared at the hand as though it was something revolting.

"I am not the boy you think you know."

Lily's arm fell limply to her side. She looked almost catatonic.

"Please, Harry, don't hurt them anymore."

The boy's gaze turned slowly to the speaker. Sirius flinched but did not look away.

"Sirius," Harry pronounced the name slowly, "You and Remus were perhaps the only ones besides the Headmaster to treat me as I ought to have been treated. For that, I hold you in the highest of regard. But your assertion disappoints me. Their pain is nothing but a dull ache compared to what I have gone through. I am not surprised, though. You are friends with them, and so you feel you must defend them. Your loyalty is praiseworthy. Your blindness, however, is not."

"I'm not blind to what they did!" Sirius protested, "I stayed away from them for a long time, Harry! But no matter what, they're still my friends! I've forgiven them-" the man suddenly looked ill.

"And I have not," Harry returned smoothly, and Dumbledore marveled at how quickly the boy had backed the auror into a corner, "Is there anything else, Sirius?"

The man looked down and did not reply. Albus sighed again before speaking.

"Harry, may I ask when you decided to leave?"

The emerald eyes swiveled from Sirius to stare at him instead.

"I didn't decide to leave. There was no planning beforehand. It was an instantaneous thing."

Dumbledore's eyebrows quirked upwards. The boy noticed this and his smile grew.

"I didn't plan on leaving, Headmaster. I still held on to the hope that one day the situation would change and I would become something more than just a boy watching from the shadows. It was a forlorn hope, but I was just a child then. I didn't know any better. I remember that day well. Adam was the center of attention again, and these two," Harry gestured to the two Potters, "were more aggravating in their shows of affection than usual. So I did what I always do when I couldn't stand watching anymore. I went for a walk. Nothing too far. Just a stroll. After all," the boy's tone turned mocking, "I didn't want them to worry. As I walked, my mind began to wander. Little thoughts at first, but those grew into something more. I began to wonder, would my family even notice me being gone? Would they be worried when I didn't show up on time for dinner? Would they come looking for me when night came and I was still missing? I think a part of me already knew the answer. But I was still hoping. I still thought that maybe one day they would look at me the same way they did Adam. And so, I waited. And waited. And waited."

The boy looked at his captivated audience. He smiled ruthlessly.

"They didn't come."

McGonagall gasped. Sirius made a faint growling noise in his throat. Dumbledore felt his cheeks grow red in anger.

"I stood outside for an entire day. There was just a single door separating me from them. The distance was so close. All I had to do was open that door and there would be the comfort of a warm home and hot food. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. What use is warmth when the heart grows cold? What use is food when it tastes like ash in my mouth? What use is a family when they didn't know I existed? Those comforts were a lie. And as I stood outside of their house for those long hours, I began to realize that. And yet," Harry's voice became disgusted, "And yet, I still couldn't do it. I still couldn't leave because I had a heart. My mind saw the truth. My heart refused to do the same. So I waited for a bit longer, and then a bit longer, and after that, still longer. Why haven't they come for me? Did they not notice I was gone? Perhaps they had an accident? Something so horrendous that needed their full attention. That had to be it. That could be the only explanation. So I took a chance. I peered into a window. And what I saw would make even my foolish heart see the plain truth."

The boy closed his eyes and his face, as cold as it was, grew wistful. It looked like he was reliving a memory.

"The three of you were sitting there, at the table. Dinner had just been served. James was laughing at something Adam had just said. Adam was shoveling food into his mouth. And Lily was smiling, watching the two of you. It was beautiful. Utterly, utterly beautiful. The perfect family. The joy on your faces. The happiness in your eyes. I could see it all. And I was not part of it," the wistful expression faded, and in its place a small glower hovered on the handsome face, "It struck me then, that I could never be part of this beautiful family. That no matter how hard I tried, I would always be in the shadows, watching enviously on as the three of you lived the life that should also have been mine. The happiness in your eyes would never be directed towards me. The joy on your faces would never be because of me. Adam was the true joy in your lives, and I was nothing," Harry's eyes opened, and Dumbledore recoiled at the rage they contained, "I truly think a part of me died that day. As I watched the three of you sitting at the table, I felt that part of me writhe in agony. I could hear it scream in pain in my mind. And then it was gone. The Harry that you know, the shy, timid boy who sat in the shadows waiting to be seen, died on that day. What is left now is

me. A shell of him. A distortion of the true Harry James Potter," the boy paused, and his tone grew mocking once more, "In a way, I should thank you. The two of you. And Adam. For if you had not done this to me, I would not be what I am today. So I thank you, James and Lily Potter, for bequeathing to me this existence."

Both Potters were in a mess. Their shoulders were slumped. Their heads hung low. They wore looks of utter dejection, looks of people who had lost all hope. Dumbledore felt guilty that a small part of him delighted in their misery.

"What happened next, Harry?" the old wizard asked.

"I left," the boy saw the disbelieving stares he was being given and smiled back in return, "Yes. I left that house with nothing but the clothes on my back."

"How did you survive?" Sirius breathed.

"I almost didn't," Harry replied and said nothing more.

"You're not going to tell us?"

The boy regarded his godfather coolly.

"I only agreed to explain why I left. What happened after is not part of the bargain."

"Cunning boy," Moody spoke for the first time, "Not telling us the important parts eh? How do we know you didn't do something dangerous when you were gone? You could've learned some Dark Arts and come back looking for revenge. How do we know we can trust you?"

"Alastor," Dumbledore scolded, "Now is not the time-"

"No, Headmaster," Harry held out a hand for silence, "He's right. The twin brother to the Boy-Who-Lived magically appearing when his name comes out of the Goblet of Fire. The very idea is outlandish. Impossible, even. He has every right to be suspicious. How can you trust me? After all, I just said I hated them," the boy gestured to the Potters, "The answer to your question, Moody, is

that you can't. You can't trust me. The only thing you can count on is my word, and I think we all know what you think of that."

"That's right lad!" Moody barked, "Your words are meaningless. Show me your deeds instead and I'll be satisfied," the Defense of the Dark Arts teacher turned to Dumbledore, "Albus, if we can use Veritaserum on him-"

"No!" everyone turned to James, who was directing an angry glare towards Moody, "You can't use that on my son! I won't let you use that on my son!"

"Alastor," Dumbledore said again, "I do not believe such a harsh course of action is necessary."

"The boy could very well be a murderer, Albus! We can't take that chance!"

"A murderer?" Harry sounded amused, "Is that what you think of me? I am curious. If I am a murderer, what does that make you, Alastor Moody? A murderer as well?"

"I am no murderer!" Moody spat.

"Of course not," the boy returned smoothly, "My mistake. You only kill people who try to defend themselves."

"You take that back!"

"No, no, I don't think I will," Harry's voice turned cold in an instant and when he took a step towards Moody, the man stepped back, unease across his scarred face, "You see, Moody. I am unlike the others. I am different from them. Murderers give into their hate. Killers allow their hate to rule them. I am neither. My hate is a weapon. It is the sword in my hand and the strength in my arm. My contempt is my armor. It is the shield I carry and the plate that I wear. Whereas others might bow to their emotions, I will never bend. I am in control here, and I will never falter in my purpose," the boy grinned, "And besides, if I really wanted revenge, you wouldn't be able to stop me."

Harry turned slowly to Dumbledore as the rest of the room stood in stunned silence.



"Are we done here, Headmaster?"

Albus sighed.

"Yes. I daresay we are, Harry."

"Then I believe this affair has been concluded."

The boy spun on his heel and headed for the door. Lily gave a small gasp and tore free from James's arms.

"Wait, Harry! We... We love you!"

The boy stopped dead in his tracks. His shoulders tensed slightly. His hand began twitching again.

"Six years ago, and I would have done anything to hear those words. Now..." Harry turned towards them, his face an emotionless mask, "Now I feel nothing."

And then he strode through the door.

Fleur walked quietly alongside her bodyguard as they navigated through the twists and turns that were Hogwarts' corridors. The silence between them was strained and heavy, and the quarter-Veela was desperately wracking her brain for a way to break the suffocating stillness. Bayard did it for her.

"If you are not at the training session tomorrow, I will understand."

Fleur was so stunned by her bodyguard's words that she momentarily ground to a halt. The boy continued on for a few steps before noticing, and turned back, an expression of puzzlement on his face.

"Miss Delacour?"

She closed the gap in a second and stood in front of him, her Veela aura radiating with anger.

"What did you say to me?" she hissed.

Most men would have been terrified of an enraged Veela bearing down on them. Bayard didn't even flinch.

"I said, Miss Delacour, that if you are not at the training session tomorrow, I will understand."

She wanted to slap him.

"And you think I will do that to you? Just abandon you because of what I heard today?"

The boy smiled charmingly at her. For the first time since meeting him, Fleur noticed how fake it looked.

"Most women would."

The quarter-Veela felt her sudden anger dissipate. Washed away and replaced by grim determination.

"I am not most women, Mister Bayard."

The boy's lips twitched at her play of words. Fleur was sure it had been the beginning of a real smile, and not a fake one like he was currently wearing.

"Things will be different," he said simply.

"They will be. I will have to call you Harry from now on instead of Bayard."

She smiled when her bodyguard gave her an exasperated look.

"That was not what I meant. Things are going to be different between you and me. You know my history now, and even if you deny it, I know it has changed your perception of me."

"Yes," Fleur said gently, "You told me that same story back at Beauxbatons. I didn't believe it then. I thought it was a lie."

"All lies have some form of truth to them, Miss Delacour," the boy replied sternly, "Mine just happened to be more of the latter than the former."

"Still, you are wrong," the quarter-Veela watched her bodyguard closely, "About me thinking differently. You are still the same in my eyes."

Bayard gave her another fake smile.

"I know you are trying to cheer me up, Miss Delacour, and I appreciate the effort. But-"

"Are you the same boy I met in my father's mansion?" she interrupted.

Her bodyguard's face was momentarily confused.

"I am."

"Are you the same boy that saved me from those bounty hunters?" Fleur continued on.

"I am but-"

"Are you the same boy that has been teaching me how to defend myself each and every morning?"

"Miss Delacour-"

"Are you the same boy I heard telling me at the feast that you would be behind me, supporting me every step of the way?"

This time, Bayard did not try to protest.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Then nothing has changed," she replied quietly.

The boy looked at her, stared at her in a measuring way, and Fleur welcomed it.

"There will be differences," he repeated.

"Not in the way I think of you,"

"And what do you think of me?" her bodyguard challenged.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Fleur placed a hand firmly on both his cheeks. Bayard blinked in surprise. He was about to say something when Fleur dragged him in close, and kissed him long and hard. There was no tongue involved, but neither was it chaste. If Fleur had a word to describe it, it would be passionate. She could taste him, savor him, and in return he could feel the heavy arousal that was her allure. Their lips pressed against one another for what seemed like an eternity. And then she broke it, panting slightly, face a brilliant shade of crimson. Her bodyguard looked stunned, truly, honestly stunned, and the quarter-Veela caught a glimpse of the boy that lay hidden behind the mask.

Fleur smiled softly.

"That is what I think of you, Harry James Potter."

Severus Snape had gone from liking the boy to hating him and then liking him all over again. He could not bear to see Lily in pain, but James and Sirius was another matter entirely. The way the two men were looking like now, their heads hung low, their postures defeated, was something the potions master would savor for a very long time. If only Lily had not been a target of the boy's cold rage, then Snape was sure this would have been one of his favorite days.

The head of Slytherin took a long look around the room. Flitwick and Sprout were both gone. They were trustworthy, but they were not of the Order, and what Albus wanted them to hear was for Order members only.

"What I am wondering, Albus," Minerva was saying, "is how Harry's name came up in the first place. There was an age restriction placed on the goblet. Not even the Weasley twins could get in, and they tried everything."

Snape scowled. He had no love for any Weasley, and the ones McGonagall had mentioned were especially aggravating.

"It is not a question of how, Minerva," Dumbledore said slowly, "But a question of why."

"Albus?"

"What is important is not how Harry was chosen, but why."

"Maybe the boy wanted some glory for himself," Moody growled from the corner, "Wanted to outshine his brother for once. That's what I would wager."

Snape sneered. That was obviously not the case. He too had first mistaken the boy for a glory seeking fool like his brother, but events had proven that belief false. Harry had been clearly angry at being selected, even if his face hid it well.

"I do not think that is something Harry would ever do, Alastor," Dumbledore replied somberly.

"Who knows?" the grizzled ex-auror shrugged, "Six years could change a person."

Lily gave a small whimper. Snape glared hatefully at Moody. Damn that man for twisting the barb in Lily's fresh wound.

"No, Alastor," the old wizard said, "If Harry had wanted to reveal himself to spite his family, he would have done so at the beginning of the year. The goblet has forced him to compete, and in doing so, forced him to expose himself. I had hoped that Harry would come to terms with his past on his own and meet his family under more extenuating circumstances."

"Wait, Albus," Lily whispered, "You knew?"

Dumbledore leaned back into his chair and sighed.

"I knew since the day of the welcoming feast."

Snape was surprised and a tad angry. Albus Dumbledore was not one to keep things like this away from the ears of his followers. Judging from McGonagall's stunned expression, the Headmaster hadn't told her either.

"Why didn't you tell us!" James took a step towards the old wizard angrily, and Sirius was forced to latch onto his arm to pull him back, "Damn it Albus, he's my son!"

"If I had told you," Dumbledore returned smoothly, "It would have changed nothing."

"You don't know that!"

"Harry's anger is something that will not disappear overnight, James. And revealing him to the public would have done nothing but direct that anger towards me."

"But he's my son," James said again, softly this time.

"And I consider him to be my grandson."

James looked away, and Snape crowded inwardly at his shame.

"What if the goblet didn't choose him, Albus?" Lily gazed imploringly at the old wizard.

"Then I would have allowed him to leave Hogwarts with his disguise intact."

Both Potters looked stricken. Dumbledore noticed this and smiled sadly.

"It is my hope that one day Harry will forgive us. But I will not pressure him to do so. I have failed him once already and I will not do so again."

"You mentioned why the goblet would choose the lad," Moody's magical eye was roving wildly about the room, but the man's gaze was firmly anchored on the Headmaster.

"Indeed I did, Alastor, but the explanation we all seek lies within the magic in the cup," Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully before continuing, "There is a theory on how the Goblet of Fire works. A theory that I might say had the Unspeakables in arms when it was first suggested. Most wizards and witches do not know about it, for the various Departments of Mysteries in every nation guard their secrets with the utmost jealousy," the Headmaster flicked his wand

lazily, and puffs of smoke appeared above his desk. Slowly, they formed letters, grey and dull, and Snape had to squint to see them clearly. The letters became words, and soon those left in the room could make out 'Durmstrang', 'Beauxbatons', and 'Hogwarts' floating in front of the old wizard, "For the Goblet of Fire to work, it must be able to choose. And for it to choose correctly, it must be enchanted with some of the most powerful truth charms known to wizarding kind. Otherwise, it would be easily fooled."

Dumbledore flicked his wand again, and the name 'Viktor Krum' slowly materialized below the 'Durmstrang' cloud.

"The goblet looks for one thing amongst potential champions, and that is ability. Or in other words, magical strength. The champions that were selected today are the most powerful wizards and witches in their respective years. They have to be, in order to complete the tasks."

Another flick and the name 'Fleur Delacour' floated slowly into position beneath the 'Beauxbatons' cloud.

"Beyond that, there are no other qualifications on becoming champion. But whereas there is only one condition on being selected, there are far more conditions on being barred. A student, for example, cannot write down the name of another student and enter him or her into the tournament. The goblet will immediately detect that the name entered is not in the student's own handwriting, and disqualify that name from the selection process."

Dumbledore waved his wand again, and 'Cedric Diggory' began to materialize under the 'Hogwarts' smoke.

"Nor can a student enter his or her name under another school. The magic in the goblet will detect the lie, and likewise, will prevent that student from being considered. You will never see a Beauxbatons student being selected as Hogwart's champion, or a Hogwarts student participating under Durmstrang's banner. For our suspect to have fooled the goblet, he or she would have needed to be especially crafty."

The old wizard gestured with his wand, and Snape watched in disbelief as another cloud of smoke appeared and slowly began to form the words 'The Boy-Who-Lived'.

"The Goblet of Fire is impervious to lies. But it is vulnerable to lies wrapped in the truth. I believe that our suspect used a Confundus Charm to make the goblet believe that there was a fourth school participating in this tournament, and entered Adam's name under it."

"Adam?" Lily stared at the clouds of smoke in distress, "But it was Harry's name that came from the cup."

"Indeed, and I daresay had our suspect been less careful, then it may very well have been Adam forced to compete in this tournament. But, I believe the suspect was very meticulous in planning this out, to the point that he or she used the Confundus Charm a second time to force the goblet into accepting only one student."

Dumbledore pointed his wand to the fourth cloud, and slowly, a smoky 'Adam Potter' started to drift under 'The Boy-Who-Lived'.

"I believe that whoever it was that fooled the goblet was targeting Adam, and not Harry. However, the suspect's thoroughness would be his undoing. The second Confundus Charm made the goblet's selection of the fourth school very specific. When the time came, the cup would select the Boy-Who-Lived, and only him. It would not consider anything else. Not even the handwriting on the paper."

Adam's name hung there for a brief second, before vanishing, and in its place, 'Harry Potter' hovered, drifting slowly in the air.

"Even though Adam's name was entered into the cup, the Goblet of Fire did not choose him because he did not fit the qualifications of being the Boy-Who-Lived."

"But that means," McGonagall appeared stricken, as did everyone else, "That means..."

"Yes," Dumbledore slowly looked at each occupant of the room in turn, "That means there is a very real chance that Harry is the Boy-Who-Lived, and Adam is not."

I feel pain. A piercing, ripping agony. Something I have not felt for a long time. I look down, to where Hate's sword has been driven



through my shoulder. Ichor pours from the wound, and stains the robes I wear black with blood.

"This," I say to him, "was unexpected."

The knight does not reply and instead wrenches his blade free. I give a grunt as the sword leaves my flesh. A spray of blood is released and I watch, bemused, as a few droplets land on Hate's armor.

"This," I say again, "was pathetic."

"A hundred bouts, my lord," Hate finally replies, "You lasted only a hundred bouts against me tonight. Most nights our duels last in the thousands. What's more, I managed to injure you," the knight's tone sounds clipped, as if the very thought is heinous to him, "I have not managed such a thing for a very long time."

"Indeed," I press a hand against the wound. The pain I can ignore. The blood that surges around my fingers, I cannot. I close my eyes and will the wound to go away. I feel a slight jolt as the magic begins its healing work. The blood stops flowing. The flesh reknits. The skin melts together until nothing remains but a slight scar. One more amongst many.

Hate offers a plated hand. I take it and he pulls me up from my kneeling position.

"What ails you, my lord?" he asks me.

I smile thinly.

"Am I that transparent, Hate?"

The knight plants his sword into the ground tip first. My blood still stains its edges.

"Transparent, maybe not. But I know when something is wrong when you cannot last in a match against me. That, and I can feel the turmoil in your soul. Something is wrong, no?"

"Yes. It should not have been this complicated," I say softly. My fingers trace over the freshly healed wound absently, "All this was

supposed to be easy. Come to Hogwarts. Protect the girl. Watch her compete in the tournament. Take the gold and leave. It was supposed to be simple."

"Life is rarely simple, my lord," the knight says back, "Otherwise there would be very few left willing to live it."

"Well. I doubt there are many out there willing to live my life."

Hate peers down at me.

"Do not be so sure, my lord. There are many fools in this world. I'm sure more than one would delight in having your strength. If only they were so willing to embrace the suffering that comes with the strength."

I chuckle at his words.

"We've worked hard, eh Hate? To become what we are today?"

The knight nods solemnly.

"What ails you, my lord?" he asks again.

I turn to him.

"I feel... lost."

"Lost," Hate repeats, his voice contemplative.

"Yes. I felt the anger. The rage. Coursing through my veins. I can still feel them now. Shimmering just below the surface. You were right all along."

"And what about that makes you feel lost?"

"Monsters don't feel, Hate," I whisper, "We don't have emotions. We're not supposed to have emotions. I should not ever feel angry. I should not ever feel rage. These things are alien to me, and yet I feel them anyways. I am... lost. If I am not a monster, then what am I?"

"You are human, my lord."

"No," I snap, "I shed my humanity long ago to become what I am today. What I can do... What I have done... They cannot be replicated by humans."

"That does not mean there is no shred of humanity left within you," the joints in Hate's armor creak as he moves to stand beside me, "You have done great things, my lord. Impossible things. Some may even call them monstrous things. But in the end, these deeds do not define you. Your character, my lord, is what you make of it, and though you think yourself inhuman, the truth is far more complicated," the knight swivels his head until his gaze matches mine, "Great men have done great deeds in the past, but they are still men."

I shake my head.

"That is not all."

"What else then, my lord?"

I remember silvery-blond hair. Deep blue eyes. The soft touch of dainty fingers. A face breathtakingly beautiful looming ever closer.

"She kissed me."

"And?"

"And now, whenever I think of her, I feel a tingling in my nerves. Whenever I think of her, I wish to continue thinking of her, no matter what. I do not understand, Hate. I do not know what this is, and I do not know why I am behaving this way."

"You are feeling another emotion, my lord."

"And what emotion is that?"

The knight stares at me.

"Affection."

"Affection," I breathe, "I am unsure that is what I feel."

"You are not unsure. You are afraid."

"Afraid?" I repeat, and my features twist into one of amusement, "I think not."

"I can feel it, my lord, lurking beneath your masks."

I laugh. It sounds forced. False.

"I have walked upon a field of corpses. I have piled high the skulls of my foes. I have stared into the unblinking eyes of Death itself. My hands are stained red with blood. My wand has ended the lives of men and beasts alike. My sword has cleaved flesh from bone and parted heads from shoulders. Nightmares do not torment me for I do not flinch at their touch. Dreams of the dead and damned are nothing but pale wisps of smoke in my mind. I have seen things both terrible and great. Witnessed the glories of mankind and its fallacies all the same. Nothing fazes me. Nothing surprises me. This world may end tomorrow, and yet my face, my true face, would remain the same, etched into lifeless stone. And now... And now you are telling me I am afraid? Have you lost your mind, Hate?"

I clench my hand into a fist.

"I fear no evil."

The fingers clutch tightly together. Unyielding. Strong.

"I fear no death."

I relax them, and the digits splay out until I can see my palm again.

"I fear nothing, for there is nothing left on this world for me to fear."

The knight chuckles lightly. Soft as it is, the noise is still akin to metal.

"And that is the irony of it, my lord. That one, such as you, who has been inured of all things terrible, would be afraid of something so small and innocuous."

"I am not afraid."

"You can deceive everyone else on this earth, but you cannot deceive me," burning eyes the same color as mine regards me impassively, "Your masks may fool these children, but they are nothing but frail façades to me. You are afraid my lord. Not of bloodshed or slaughter. Not of beasts or monsters. You are afraid of feeling back. You are afraid that in due time, the girl will grow tired of you and cast you aside, just like your parents did. You are afraid that your affection will never be returned by her. You are afraid she will belittle you, make fun of you, and tread on your feelings. You fear committing, my lord, not because of the responsibility but of what might happen should you fail."

I stay silent. I can sense Hate smiling sadly at me.

"There is no shame in fear, my lord. There is only shame if you allow fear to defeat you."

"But I cannot feel, Hate."

"It is not that you cannot, my lord, but you will not. You have always misled yourself into thinking you cannot, when you clearly can. Who knows? Perhaps one day the affection can even grow into love."

I chuckle bitterly.

"And do you believe I am capable of that? Of love?"

The knight rests an armored gauntlet against the pommel of his sword.

"No. But you can always try."

## Chapter 13: Attraction

Morning did not bring the training Fleur had expected. Instead of hours of spellwork and duels, her instructor had requested from her something much simpler.

"Let us take a walk," the boy had said.

And so they did.

The view the dawning sun offered on the lake was breathtaking, and the quarter-Veela could see why the boy often spent his spare time lingering by its edges. The morning light made the tranquil waves shimmer and shine, made the peaceful waters seem like a pool of flowing silver, and had Fleur not had other things on her mind she would have stayed to enjoy the marvelous sight. But instead, her conscience remained on her bodyguard, whose life seemed to be a direct opposite of the lake's tranquil surface.

Harry Potter. Not Bayard anymore, but Harry.

The names were different, but the person was the same. She was sure of it.

The boy in question turned to her, smiling Bayard's smile but wearing Harry's features. It did nothing but enhance his looks. Bayard had been charmingly handsome, but Fleur had always thought he had been too charming, too charismatic. There had always been something fake about Bayard, though she had never been able to tell what it was. She suspected it was because he was too perfect. Girls flocked to him for that very reason, desperate for his attention. Fleur was grounded in reality, and knew that perfection was something that only dreams could achieve. Now, Harry. Bitter. Resentful. Filled with hatred. Here was the dark mirror of Bayard, different in every way, but also real. Real. When the boy had smiled at her last night, telling her that he would be behind her every step of the way, it had not been Bayard that was smiling, but Harry. Two very different people. And yet the same.

It was ironic, in a way, that Bayard was someone she would always be attracted to, but never love, yet Harry was someone that would repel her at first but could grow to love.

Bayard... Harry regarded her silently for a while, musing.

"Last night..." he paused, and fell silent. Fleur did not blame him. Her impulsive side had acted before her brain could rein it in, and she had kissed him as a result. It had been an embarrassing moment for her, especially when the boy made no more attempts at conversation for the remainder of the night. To say that the walk to the carriage had been awkward was putting it lightly. Still, she did not regret what she did, and had Fate given her another chance, she would have done exactly the same thing, albeit a bit more passionately, "Last night was interesting."

Fleur smiled slightly.

"But it was also a moment of weakness. For the both of us."

Her smile waned.

"What do you mean?" she asked in French.

"I mean that yesterday shouldn't have happened," he saw her hurt look and hastily corrected himself, "Not that I'm complaining... Look... I'm not very good at returning these emotions. It's just that I don't think things would have happened the way they happened if the goblet didn't choose my name. And I think it would be the best if we pretended they didn't happen."

"You don't understand," she said to him, blushing slightly, "It wouldn't have mattered if you were chosen as champion or not," she swallowed, "I like you."

The boy sighed.

"I know, Miss Delacour."

That shocked her. But more than that, it puzzled her.

"If you know, why are you trying to dissuade me?"

"I don't care for you like the way you think I care for you. I am trying to dissuade you because I do not want to hurt you."

"The fact that you are trying just means that you do care for me," she returned.

"The contract," the boy replied, "It is because of the contract. I care because of the contract."

"I don't believe you," Fleur said firmly.

"What will it take for you to believe me?"

"Say it. Look me in the eyes and say it."

Harry smiled.

"All too easy."

The boy's eyes locked into her own. Fleur stared back, refusing to budge a single inch.

"I care for you, Miss Delacour, only because of the contract. I am here for the gold, and that is the only reason. When the year ends, I will be gone, and you will never see me again."

At the very last word, her bodyguard's eyes flickered slightly away. It was a sign of uncertainty, hidden well behind the emerald orbs. To the quarter-Veela, it was enough. Fleur smiled triumphantly back.

"Liar."

To her surprise, Harry didn't try to deny it. He merely closed his eyes and sighed again.

"I tried. I tried to save you from the pain, but if you wish to take this path, then I will not stop you."

One of his hands clenched into a fist. And then it relaxed, fingers splaying out again. Fleur could see red marks in the palm, where the fingernails had dug deep.

"What you ask of me, Miss Delacour, I cannot give," her bodyguard began.

"You will not give," the quarter-Veela corrected.



"No. I cannot give," the boy smiled thinly at her confused expression, "You do not understand. I don't expect you to understand. Hate is the only thing I can feel with any certainty. It has been my only companion for a very long time. More than that, Hate is what defines me. Hate is what gives me purpose, and without it, I am lost. Hate is me, Miss Delacour, and to part with it is to part with a piece of my soul."

Her bodyguard was right. She didn't understand, but that did not deter her one bit.

"You do not have to give up your hate, Harry. But you can feel other things as well. I will teach you."

"You will teach me?" Harry sounded incredulous, "How will you teach me?"

The quarter-Veela blushed and looked down. It was obvious to anyone that she had not thought that one through.

"Give up, Miss Delacour. It is a fool's hope."

Fleur snapped her head back in the boy's direction.

"You would have me forget everything, Harry?" she growled angrily, "Forget that you saved me back in that forest? Ignore you for the rest of the year?"

"If that is what it takes," her bodyguard said casually.

"No. I won't do that," Fleur glared fiercely at the boy, "I will never do something like that."

"It is a fool's hope," Harry repeated.

"But it is still hope!" she snapped back.

Her bodyguard fell silent, and took the time to regard her closely. The emerald pupils bore into her, and she fought the urge to look away. The smile came back, though it was bitter.

"What you are asking of me," the boy said slowly, "is very close to impossible. You want me to open up to you but know that is something I have never done before. You want me to give affection to you, to like you back, but understand that what little affection I knew before I ran away I have almost completely forgotten. These are not lies, Miss Delacour. I have been deprived of these things long ago, and I am not sure I can gain them back. I'm not sure if I even want them back."

"I know," Fleur answered softly, "But I still want to try."

"Why do you still want to try?"

It was a good question. And she had an equally good answer. She just hoped it would be enough to convince the boy she liked.

"Because I know that you're in there, Harry. The real you. Behind the walls that you've built around yourself. I know why you've built them. I can even sympathize. But staying behind those walls won't solve anything. And I won't let you suffer in there alone. I'll drag you out, kicking and screaming if I have to."

Harry turned to look at her. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"And what if there is nothing hidden behind those walls? What if you finally batter them down, and discover that there was nothing there in the first place? What would you do then?"

Fleur opened her mouth for a rebuttal. The boy held out a hand to silence her.

"There is a very good chance, Miss Delacour, that despite your best attempts, your efforts will be in vain. There is a very good chance that despite whatever you have done, through the sweat and blood and tears you have shed, that there will be nothing to reward you at the finish. This path you wish to take is admirable, and I thank you for trying. But you must know that at the end, when things matter most, there is a possibility that the dreams you held dear for so long to your heart will be proven to be naught but hollow ashes," the boy closed his eyes and paused. When he opened them again the smile was back on his face, "There is a chance, Miss Delacour, that there will be no happy ending to this story."

Fleur nodded and accepted the words. It was a terrifying thought, what her bodyguard had just said. For what Veela wanted above all else from their partners was affection. To hold and be held in turn. To love and be loved. The fact that the boy couldn't do these things would have driven full-blooded Veela away, immune to the allure or not. But Fleur wasn't a full-blooded Veela, and though her magical side shied away from committing to him, her human side did not.

"Well..." Fleur blushed again, "Well, I'll just have to try my hardest, won't I? To reach that happy ending."

The boy stared at her. Then the corners of his smile twitched slightly.

"You are perhaps the most stubborn client I have ever had to deal with," he said, a trace of amusement lingering across his face, "I don't know if that's good or bad."

"I think," she replied, "it is a good thing for the both of us."

The amusement faded. He looked serious once more.

"You do know that I will treat everyone else as I have done before. I will speak to them and interact with them as though I was still Bayard. This mask will remain on my face for them."

"I understand, Harry. I know that is too much to ask of you."

The boy shook his head slowly.

"No. Not too much. Too soon."

Fleur started. She stared at her bodyguard with hope in her eyes.

"Harry... does that mean..."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He averted his face, but Fleur was sure she caught a tinge of embarrassment crossing the boy's cheek.

"Don't get me wrong, Miss Delacour. I still think what you are trying to do will amount to nothing. I'm just preventing you from hounding me in the future."

Fleur hid her smile behind her hand. Inwardly, her heart sang with joy.

"Well, if that is the case, are you prepared for your first lesson?"

Her bodyguard turned to look at her.

"What lesson?"

"I'm going to teach you, remember? How to feel other emotions."

"So now the teacher has become the student?" Harry chuckled, "Very well. If you think it will work. What's the first lesson, Miss Delacour?"

The quarter-Veela withdrew her hand so her bodyguard could see her smile.

"Your first lesson," she said, "is to start calling me Fleur."

The boy smiled back. This time, it didn't look fake.

"I think I can do that."

Albus Dumbledore watched in silence from the staff table as the boy with emerald eyes began to talk to his fellow Beauxbatons students. He was good, Albus had to admit, charismatic even, and in no time at all, the French contingent was laughing at his jokes and chattering away as though nothing had happened. The Ravenclaws at the table, though, shied away, staring at the boy with distrust and in some cases, hatred.

The old wizard sighed. Even though the tournament was supposed to foster a healthy, competitive environment, Albus did not doubt for a minute that there would be students who would take that competitiveness to the extreme. The Hogwarts quidditch seasons in the years past were proof of that. He just hoped no one would be foolish enough to challenge Harry directly.

"It's not really him, is it Albus?" a soft voice asked from beside him and Dumbledore turned in his seat to regard his deputy headmistress. McGonagall was looking at the boy with sad eyes,

though her usual stern expression had not faded, "That's not the real Harry."

"No, Minerva, that's not really him."

"I can't believe I missed it," McGonagall murmured, "It was so obvious last night. But before I just thought he was a regular boy."

"He fooled us all," Dumbledore amended, "He wears his disguise exceptionally well."

"It's like he's two different people," the Gryffindor head of house continued softly, "The one we saw yesterday was so filled with hatred. The one we see now is like any other boy."

"And you wonder which one is the real Harry?"

"Yes, I do Albus."

The two paused as more laughter from the Ravenclaw table drifted into their ears.

"I am afraid to say even I do not know the answer to that question, Minerva," Dumbledore said truthfully, "There is a chance that the Harry we observed yesterday night was just another persona he developed to protect himself."

"Really, Albus?" McGonagall looked hopeful, "If that is true, do you think the real Harry would reconcile with his family?"

"Reconcile?" Dumbledore peered down at his deputy headmistress over his spectacles, "That is a strange question for you to ask, Minerva. I had thought you distanced yourself from the Potters years ago."

A flicker of anger spread across McGonagall's usual stoic face.

"It is not the Potters that I am concerned with, Albus," she said stiffly, "They reaped what they sowed, and a part of me couldn't be happier at the outcome," her features softened, "But the boy needs a family. Or at least someone to listen to his troubles. He's holding onto so much hatred for what they did to him. And even if that hatred is well-deserved, it is still hatred. It can destroy him, Albus."

"You aren't wrong, old friend," the old wizard stroked his beard absently, "Harry's hate is something he clings on to most desperately. It will take a long time for it to fade, if it fades."

"The poor boy," McGonagall breathed, "Is there anything we can do for him? To alleviate his pain?"

"I don't think it will be one of us that heals him," the Headmaster nodded gently towards the Ravenclaw table, "I believe it will be someone more his age that finally brings him out of his shell."

Minerva arched her brows in confusion.

"What do you mean, Albus?"

Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling as he inclined his head towards the blonde-haired girl that sat next to the boy. McGonagall followed the gesture and saw what the aged wizard had known for some time.

"That is Fleur Delacour, Beauxbaton's first champion. I don't see-" Minerva blinked when the girl leaned in closer to whisper something in Harry's ear, "Oh my."

"Indeed," Dumbledore smiled.

His deputy headmistress pursed her lips in disapproval.

"She's too old for him," she declared.

"Only by three years, Minerva."

"Still. That makes her seventeen. I don't like it. She could be doing things to him that they shouldn't be doing until they're married."

Dumbledore chuckled.

"I do recall a certain head of house finding two of her favorite students sharing a moment of intimacy in a broom cupboard and turning a blind eye."

McGonagall blushed.

"It was the night before their graduation. I allowed them some leeway."

"Of course," the headmaster's eyes continued to twinkle, "The Potters still won't speak of that night to anyone, not even me. I daresay having the deputy headmistress discovering their heat of moment has left them with a lasting impression."

The woman muttered something beneath her breath. The twinkling in Dumbledore's eyes grew.

"If it were me in that scenario, Minerva, I would have offered them both a lemon drop. Wonderful things, those candies are. Magnificent at getting you out of an awkward situation."

McGonagall had recovered enough of her dignity to roll her eyes.

"You and your lemon drops, Albus," the Gryffindor head of house's face lost its flustered look and became solemn once more, "Do you truly think Miss Delacour can heal Harry, Albus? It seems so far-fetched. For a stranger to do what his family cannot."

The old wizard smiled benignly.

"Hate cannot exist without love, old friend. I believe Harry will learn that over time."

"But will it be enough?" McGonagall pressed, "Will just one girl's love be enough to erase six years of hatred?"

Dumbledore watched as Harry rose from his seat with a gracious smile and headed for the lavatories stationed outside the Great Hall. He frowned when three boys from the Slytherin table rose as well and tailed after the older Potter.

"Only time will tell, Minerva. Only time will tell."

Three of them block my path. Three boys dressed in Slytherin robes. One is the obvious ringleader. I can tell from his posture. The way he wears his pride around him like a cloak. The way he stands there, head held high and features schooled into an expression of aloof scorn. Behind him are two other boys, though they look more akin to

trolls with their bullish necks and thick, gangly arms. Lackeys, no doubt.

I think they are trying to threaten me. I cannot tell because they are doing a piss-poor job of it.

"So you're the fourth champion," the leader sneers, "You're not much to look at."

"I should hope not," my reply is automatic, "Men don't usually find other men attractive. Unless of course you're one of those men. In which case my response to you is I don't swing that way."

The boy's face turns a brilliant shade of crimson.

"W-Watch what you say to me! I'm Draco Malfoy!"

I cock my head slightly. The picture perfect of polite puzzlement.

"Never heard of him."

The boy's face turns even redder.

"The Malfoys are an ancient and noble family-" he begins no doubt what is going to be a long and boring lecture.

"I don't care."

Draco sputters in midsentence.

"You don't care?" the boy's expression is almost comical, "You should care! We're the most powerful family in magical Britain!" Draco's eyes narrow, "But then again you're a Potter," his face turns haughty, "It's a shame really. The Potters were a pureblooded family of the highest esteem. Until your father married a mudblood."

He expects me to be angry. I am not.

"Yes," I say back, "My father married a woman born to non-magical parents. What is your point?"

Draco stares at me as though I've grown two heads.



"Your father married a mudblood," the boy deliberately emphasizes the last word. He stares again when I smile.

"You make a very dull conversationist, Malfoy, with your knack of stating the obvious."

Behind him, the two trolls crack their knuckles threateningly. I nearly break out laughing. This is what they think will intimidate me? Adolescent youths who have yet to see the spill of blood? Teenage wretches that have still yet to wean themselves off their mother's teat? I would not have believed it were it not the fact that these two look dead serious. One of them is even trying to stand taller, believing height alone will be enough to cow me.

"Watch your tone with me," Draco has adopted an arrogant expression, as though if the two fools behind him are actually capable of saving him, "I am your superior. My blood is purer than yours."

"If that is what you think," I say, voice still polite, even though on the inside I am laughing at the poor comedy these three are offering me, "Now if you will excuse me, I have better things to do."

I attempt to move past them. The Slytherins mirror my movement, and once more I find them obstructing my path.

"I'm not done with you," Draco growls in what he no doubt thinks is a menacing tone.

I smile.

"You have made a mistake, Draco. You, in your ignorance, have decided that it is a good idea to block my way. You, in your stupidity, are trying to prevent me from reaching my objective. That was a mistake, Draco, and the only reason why I have not hurt you is because you are still very near to being a child. I will allow you two more mistakes before I am forced to do things I will not regret"

"Shut up!" the boy snarls, "You're just a lowly half-blood! I don't know what that Veela sees in you! I am much better! I'm richer, better-looking, more desirable! You're just a no-good, dirty cheater! I'll make her see the truth! I'll take her away from you!"

I am about to reply when I feel an unexpected change in my heart. It is so sudden that at first I do not know what it is. This causes me to pause, to think. And when I do realize what it is, my smile changes into a scowl. Jealousy. I am actually feeling jealous. I am actually afraid of this whelp taking her away from me. The emotion is faint, almost nonexistent, but I cannot deny it is there. The thought of her being stolen away has turned from being a forgone conclusion into something I do not want.

Suddenly things aren't so funny anymore.

Draco takes my scowl to be a scowl of someone who has had the truth dragged from him. He sneers victoriously.

"You cheated your way into the tournament! It's obvious to everyone here! And once she finds out, she'll ditch you and come to me! I have the wealth! My father is the richest wizard in Britain! I have the looks too! She'll come running to me!"

"Fleur," I say truthfully, "is not that type of woman."

"And you would know!" the boy growls out, "I bet she just opened her legs to you just for practice!"

My jealousy fades. The smile comes back.

"You have made your second mistake, Draco. You may insult me in whatever way you want. You may even throw swear words on my family and my ancestors. But to insult the one I am to protect... that I will not abide. One more mistake, Draco. I will allow you one more mistake."

My words seem to anger him even more.

"You have no right to speak to me like that! You're lower than me! You are an insect! You are less than an insect! You are nothing!" the boy rants, "I don't know why she wants a nothing like you, but I'll make her see that you are nothing! I'll make everyone see you're nothing! Goyle!" he snaps with a leer, "Let's make Potter less presentable to the public."

One of the trolls lumbers for me, his idiotic expression brightening at the prospect of inflicting pain. At three steps away he launches a

heavy-handed blow towards my face. It would have broken my nose if it landed, as well as caused a mild concussion. If it landed.

I catch the fist in my palm. The burly boy's eyes widen in surprise.

"This," I say, "was your third mistake, Draco."

And then I squeeze. The ugly sound of bones cracking follows. Goyle bellows in pain. I ignore him and squeeze harder. I feel a jolt as my magic travels in my blood, surging into my hand like a rolling wave. Raw, pulsating power is what leaks from my fingertips, and I can hear it sing in my head as it is unleashed. The boy's bellows turn into a high-pitched squeal. No longer am I breaking his bones. I am pulverizing them into dust. Grinding them into a fine powder.

"Goyle!" the second troll roars out and surges forward to take a swing at me.

I release the boy. Goyle is still squealing, clutching at the mangled mess that was once a human hand. He will have to have the school nurse regrow each and every bone. I hear the process is most painful. A pity. I was hoping to maim him permanently.

Crabbe's fist rushes for my face. I tilt my head slightly, so the blow barely grazes past. My legs carry me forward, and my body travels with them, flowing like water past the boy's meager guard. The brute gives a muffled exclamation of surprise. His fist connects with nothing but empty air, and I am already behind him.

I smash him to the ground with a kick to the back of his leg, forcing his knees to collide against the stone floor. Another pair of cracking sounds. Fractured kneecaps. Not a good way to start the morning. One of my hands plants itself firmly on his shoulder. The other ensnares the limb that was throwing the punch.

"This is your arm," I say into his horrified face, "It's not yours any longer."

Magic spears into my hands, flowing from my core, just like any wizard when casting. The difference is that I do not need a wand to wield it. I pull, and the magic enhances my body, spreading through each and every muscle in my body. With this newfound strength I could have torn Crabbe's arm from his shoulder with sickening ease.

But that would not do. Too much blood. Too much to explain to terrified teachers and students alike. So instead I merely detach the arm from its socket. The popping sound that follows cannot compare to the ugly cracks that destroyed Goyle's hand, but even I must admit the casual way Crabbe's limb slumps from his shoulder is strangely disturbing.

The boy looks down at his ruined arm, dangling listlessly like dead rubber, and begins wailing. Madam Promfrey will have to be especially careful with this one. Connecting an arm bone back into its socket is a meticulous and painful affair, even with the aid of magic. Not to mention his shattered knees.

Both boys are screaming now, high-pitched and shrill. It almost sounds like they're whistling.

Goyle has sunk to his knees as well, tears of pain running down his cheeks as he cradles his mangled hand. I splay my fingers and grab a tuft of his hair. I do the same to Crabbe. I smash their heads together. They go limp in my hands. I drop them. They aren't screaming anymore.

I turn to Malfoy and notice his wand is pointing to me. His hand trembles and the face he wears is synonymous with abject terror. He is in the middle of his incantation. Good. That gives me plenty of time.

I move forward. My strides are blisteringly quick. A lifetime of battling Hate's blade has taught me the meaning of speed. My hand catches Malfoy's jaw before he can utter the last syllable and slams up. His mouth closes with such speed that I can hear his teeth clatter together. Whatever curse he was aiming at me fizzles at the tip of his wand and dies. The boy's eyes bulge outwards. Agony dances in his eyes. He must have bitten his tongue when I forcibly shut him up. I am proven correct when a thin trickle of blood leaks from the corner of his lips.

Inwardly, I frown. This is the weakness of wizards and their way of wand-casting. One has to say the spell for it to work. Deprive them of the means to speak, and they are no more effective than a muggle with a stick. This I have done before, sometimes by a quick Silencio, sometimes by breaking their jaw. Whatever the method,

the results are always the same. The only wizards that are dangerous are those that can cast silently and wandlessly.

My smile grows, just as I meant for it to grow. There is a reason to this smile, just as there is a reason to every emotion I show on my face. In this case, my reason is to terrify, and judging from Draco's squeamish face, it is working.

"There are thirty-two teeth in the human skull," I say slowly, deliberately, "They say a powered down Reducto can send all thirty-two of those teeth directly into your brain. Sounds painful, no? They also say that if your tongue didn't disintegrate in the blast, you even taste your own conscience before dying. I wouldn't know if this is true. I haven't tried it," I grin, "But I would like to."

Draco tries to scream. Whether in pain or fear I know not. The hand that clenches his jaws shut is like steel, and all he can manage is a muffled whimper.

"I will say this once, Draco Malfoy, and you will listen well," he fights my grip, but his attempts are futile and pathetic, "You are scum. You are trash. You are the rubbish that men pick from their shoes. You are nothing," I watch his eyes light up with impotent rage, "I have seen men like you before. All the same. Proud, arrogant, conceited. Men who would willingly bring misery to others to get what they want. These men are the ones I do not regret ending. In fact, I look forward to ending them."

My fingers tighten, constricting his jaw. The anger in his eyes vanish, replaced by fear in a heartbeat. Coward.

"If this were a battlefield," I whisper to him, "your blood would already be dripping from my hand."

I release him, and he stumbles back, pawing at his sore mouth. His eyes widen when he sees crimson staining his fingers.

"You bastard, Potter!" he spits a wad of bloody phlegm to the floor, "When my father hears of this-

"Your father isn't here to protect you," I say simply, "And even if he were, I doubt that he will last long against me."

"Hah! You can't last against my father!" Malfoy wipes the blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, "You're just a dirty half-blood!"

"A dirty half-blood that just put your two bodyguards out of commission. A dirty half-blood that held your worthless life in his hands. A dirty half-blood that still wishes to count how many teeth are in your brain after the Reducto is cast."

Malfoy pales.

"You can't threaten me! I can tell the professors! I can tell my head of house!"

"Yes," I smile, "You go do that, Draco. Run along with your tail tucked behind your legs like the dog you are. Tell them how you insulted not one, but two tournament champions. Tell them how you ordered your flunky to... what was it you said? Make me less presentable? Yes, that's it. Tell them that it was one of your pet trolls that threw the first punch. Go ahead and tell all of that to them, Draco, and see if your father's reputation is enough to cool the outrage that will follow," Malfoy pales even further, "I have a feeling then, you won't be the richest family in magical Britain anymore."

"You bastard!"

He brandishes his wand to shoot a spell at me. Nothing happens. The boy frowns and looks down. He is clutching nothing but empty air. He panics, and his eyes roam all over the hall before finally noticing something black and brown spins in my hand. It takes a second for Draco to realize what it is.

"My wand!" he cries out in indignation.

I ignore him and focus on the piece of wood that moves with a life of its own in my palm.

"Ten inches. Hawthorn wood. Unicorn hair. Made for the noble and the good of heart," I turn my attention back to him, "It is a shame that such an honorable wand ended up in the hands of someone as foul as you."

The wand stops spinning, and I clench it tightly, feeling the magic that lingers in its core. The song it sings is melancholy, the tone a weeping, mournful lament that only I can hear. I allow it to sing its sorrow for a moment longer before tossing the wand back to the boy.

"Regretful," Draco catches it clumsily, "You once had potential, Malfoy. Did you know that? You could have been something more. Something better. Your wand understood that, and it chose you for that very reason. Now, it is ashamed to have you for its master."

"What in Merlin's name are you talking about?" the boy growls at me, confusion warring with anger on his face.

"Something you will never understand, Draco," I smile again, "Now I would use that wand to levitate your underlings to the Hospital Wing. If you try anything else, I won't be inclined to be so merciful."

I brush past him. He shrinks back as our shoulders touch.

"Oh, and next time, Draco," I say over my shoulder, "Bring an army. At least they will be a challenge to me."

Adam Potter nervously swept a hand through his messy hair as he waited. Most times, the action would have relaxed him. Now, it served only to agitate him more.

Both Lily and James had been a mess once they returned from Dumbledore's office. Adam had seen them this miserable only once before, and that had been when they discovered Harry had disappeared. Now, the process was repeating all over again. Back then, he had only been eight years old, and there was nothing he could do but watch as his parents descended into the dark pit of despair. But now, with Harry here, there was a chance that could be avoided.

All he had to do was get his brother to accept them back. And then everything would be right again. Many would call his way of thinking delusion. Adam preferred to call it hope.

The target of his worries rounded the corner, alone as Adam suspected he would be. Harry had a habit of keeping to himself at night. This, to the Gryffindor's eternal shame, he had learned about in his childhood and did nothing about. Those emerald green eyes

had always peered at him from the stairs, wistful and longing as he was fawned upon by their parents. Those same eyes stared at him now, not a single speck of emotion in the gleaming orbs.

Adam took a hesitant step forward when Harry came to a halt.

"Harry," he began.

"Why are you here, Adam?" there was no greeting from the boy, no acknowledgment or gesture of respect, just a curt question.

"Mum and dad told me what happened last night," Adam swallowed nervously, "You don't... You don't really mean all that do you?"

"If I didn't mean that, why would I have said it?"

"You're just angry with us," Adam was desperately trying to convince himself, "You're just angry at us for being stupid. And I can agree with that. But the anger will fade. It has to. And then everything will be alright again. Right, Harry?"

"Is that what you really think?"

Adam felt himself freeze from those cold words.

"Sweet Merlin, Harry, you really mean what you said?"

"Yes," came the simple response.

"But what about mum and dad?" the Gryffindor stared beseechingly at the boy's face, "What about Sirius and Remus? What about Dumbledore?"

"What about them?"

"Y-You don't care?"

"No."

Adam licked his suddenly dry lips.

"What about me?"



The boy stared back, still smiling.

"What about you?"

"I'm your brother, Harry!"

"So you are."

"You don't feel anything? For me? For our parents?"

Harry blinked.

"Is this the reason why you are here, Adam?"

The Gryffindor shook his head desperately.

"Harry, you have to listen to me! What you're doing isn't good for you! You have to come back to us! We'll help you heal!"

"I don't need you to help me heal."

"Yes you do damn it! I'm your brother and-"

"No," the boy interrupted, "You are not my brother."

"W-What? What do you mean-"

"Perhaps I was did not make myself clear last night," Harry smiled one of his dazzling smiles, "Let me make myself very clear."

The boy step forward fluidly, the movement so sudden that Adam barely had the time to register he had moved at all. His arm snapped out, a whip-like blur, and the Gryffindor abruptly found tight fingers latching onto his collar. Harry's carefree smile, the one he always wore as Bayard, was gone, and in its place was the most hateful countenance Adam had ever seen. It was like someone had flicked a light switch, and the boy's face had changed along with it. Harry pulled, and Adam felt himself being hauled bodily close until they were face to face.

"I hate you Adam," the smile had turned into a vindictive grin, "Yes, I hate our parents for their stupidity and their willful neglect. But you

are different. I hold a special hatred in my heart for you, dear brother."

"Why?" Adam croaked out.

The boy leered at him, neat white teeth bared into a mocking rictus.

"Because you could've changed things, but you didn't. You could've made them see, Adam, see me for who I am. But instead, you lorded it over me like I was some common peasant. Every time they gave you a present, you came up into my room and paraded it in front of me. Every time they praised you for just being you, you made sure to rub my nose in it afterwards. Every time they hurt me, you twisted the blade in the wound. You betrayed me, Adam, worse than James and Lily ever could."

"I was just a kid, Harry." Adam whispered, knowing it was a futile defense.

"That is no excuse," Harry hissed back, and the Gryffindor looked down in humiliation.

"You know what I would have done, Adam?" Harry continued venomously, "If I was the Boy-Who-Lived and you were not? I would have dragged you into everything we did together. I would have talked to you each and every time at dinner, force the conversation so that you could be included. I would have dragged you to play quidditch, even if you did not want to, and make James see that he has another son waiting in the shadows. I would have forced you to come to those elegant parties, against anybody else's wishes, and make Lily as well as the rest of the world see that you were my brother and that I was damn proud of it. I would have forced them to see that you were their flesh and blood, just like I was, and if that did not work, I would have gone with you should you have chosen to left."

The boy's grip on his collar tightened, and the stiff cloth pressed painfully against Adam's skin.

"I would have done those things because you are my brother, Boy-Who-Lived, or not. I would have done those things because the same blood flows in our veins and the same courage beats in our hearts. I would have done those things because I loved you and

respected you as a brother should. And if the world was to end tomorrow, I would have stood by you, and we would face the end together, without doubt, without fear."

Harry released him and pushed him away. For a moment the Gryffindor was sure he saw a glimmer of sorrow in the boy's eyes.

"Because that is what brothers are for."

Adam swallowed and rubbed his neck absently, where the collar had bit into his flesh. He refused to match Harry's gaze. Shame prevented him from doing that.

"But you did none of those things for me, Adam. Not a single one. And so, you are not my brother."

At that, Adam did look up. The hateful mask had disappeared from his brother's face. Harry looked fine now, almost cheerful as he gazed back.

"I was just a kid..." the Gryffindor repeated, trying to draw strength from the words.

Harry smiled. Adam was shocked how genuine it looked.

"Then I guess that is the difference between you and I."

My hand is twitching again.

Wrath and fury, brothers in emotion, burn like a firestorm in my veins.

He dares. He dares.

My teeth grind together. My face twists into a feral snarl of hatred. The contempt I feel for him is like a physical ache that travels down my bones.

In a sense, he has succeeded. The cold facade I have wielded against my parents is useless against my brother. The irony is not lost on me. Adam has done what Lily and James could not. He has broken my mask through words alone.

I place a hand on a nearby wall and lean on it. The anger is so powerful that I actually have to use it for support.

I struggle with my facial muscles. Cool logic wars with embittered hatred for control of my face. I am glad it is logic that wins in the end. The snarl disappears, concealed by the impassive mask, and I am Bayard once more, even if the disguise is worn.

I straighten. I remove my hand from the touch of stone. It is good that no one has seen me in my moment of choler.

"Well, well, well. It appears that the charming knight has a dark, brooding side to him. Who would've thought?"

Or not.

I turn slowly towards the voice, inwardly cursing my lack of control all the time. Staring back at me are eyes the color of my own, framed on a lovely face of alabaster skin, and wreathed in long, blonde hair. An image of aristocratic beauty, poised and elegant in every way, clad in Slytherin green. It takes me a second to put a name to the face. Daphne Greengrass. Fourth year. The so called Ice Queen of her house. I can see why. Her countenance is beautiful to look upon, but the beauty is of the untouchable sort. The sneer she wears is a testament to that fact. The only ugly part of an otherwise faultless complexion. And had I not been a master of masks and facades, I would have been fooled.

"Harry Potter," the girl says to me. The tone does not match her face. Not quite. There is still a lingering warmth behind it, a crack in the ice that I am amazed no one else has noticed before.

Despite what she has said, I school my features into a charming smile, complete with a tinge of innocent curiosity.

"Is there something you want, Miss Greengrass?"

The girl crosses her arms. The movement is calculated and yet unerringly natural at the same time.

"Incredible. I've seen you argue with your brother just a minute ago. That hateful face. Those spiteful eyes. I've seen you, the real you behind that mask, and still you would hide it?"

My countenance twists into an expression of puzzlement, just like I meant it to.

"Whatever do you mean, Miss Greengrass?"

A flicker of annoyance. Others might have missed it, but to me it is as clear as day.

"That mask you wear. Always cheerful, always happy. Smiling that handsome smile each and every day. Half the female population here at Hogwarts have some sort of crush on you, you know. I wonder what they will think when they learn the boy they are crushing on is just a veneer of the real thing."

The smile she speaks of grows wider on my face.

"And what of you, Miss Greengrass?" I say back, "Your sneer is designed to ward off unwanted attention, and in that it is quite successful. But there are cracks. Oh so many cracks. I wonder what the boys in this school will think when they learn that the Ice Queen's ice is lukewarm at best."

Daphne's face remains the same, with the scornful smirk still locked in place. Her eyes, however, are now alarmed. Another mistake. Another crack in the mask.

"I see that this will get us nowhere. This constant sniping."

I incline my head slightly at her words.

"How about a truce?" she offers.

"A truce?"

"Yes," the girl nods, "I will show you what is under my mask, and you will show me what is under yours."

I ponder this for a moment. I will not deny that honest curiosity had a hand in my decision.

"Very well."

Her face changes, as does mine. Where the sneer once was, a gentle smile emerged, complete with soft, pouty lips. Her features are no longer hard, no longer wearing the disgust, instead, turning into a pleasant, almost content expression. The beauty, the untouchable aura is gone as well. I wonder why. And then it hits me. The sneer had been the reason. The mask of revulsion had made every other feature on her face stand out. Now, with it gone, with the pouting smile in its place, nothing is prominent. Now she is merely pretty instead of beautiful.

I am disappointed. I had expected something more than just an ordinary girl. My disappointment is not shared. Daphne stares at me with undisguised interest, scrutinizing my countenance to the very last detail.

"Is that it? Is that your true face?" at my nod, the girl shakes her head softly, "You look almost normal."

Then she begins laughing.

"We are complete and total opposites. Did you know that? I hide my warmth behind ice. You hide your ice behind warmth. And yet we are also the same. Both hiding something from the rest of the world."

"Unlike you, I cannot hide any longer," I point out.

"You're referring to the goblet?" the girl smiles thinly, "I do believe most of Hogwarts thought you were a homicidal maniac by the time you entered the Champion's Room. Your face looked... most gruesome."

"One of the few times I have allowed it to slip," I say regretfully.

"If you're worried, don't be," Daphne sniffed, "The idiots in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff bought the entire act today at breakfast. The Ravenclaws too. They don't like you because they think you're taking glory away from Hogwarts, but at least they don't think you're a maniacal killer or anything like that."

I hide my smile. If only she knew.

"Though Malfoy and his two mentally challenged henchmen did get roughed up pretty well this morning. Goyle will have to spend a

week in the Hospital Wing growing back every bone in his hand. Crabbe was luckier. In a way. Pomfrey says his injuries will heal in only a day, but the process will be very painful."

The girl peers at me with interest.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

My reply is automatic as it is neutral.

"I assure you, Miss Greengrass, I am the perfect model of gentlemanly manners," to my surprise, she giggles, "I would not do something as uncouth as fighting in the hallways."

"It is refreshing to speak to someone like you," she smiles at me, "It is like a game almost. What is the truth and what is the lie? Only you can decide."

I do not know what to say to that so I say nothing at all.

The girl walks closer, gauging my reaction. When she sees I offer no protest, Daphne slinks forward until she is within arm's reach of me. Her smile has turned into something else. Something that I cannot identify.

"Tracey was most exultant when Professor Snape seated the two of you together in Potions. I can see why. You have a very handsome face, Harry. Even without your mask on."

Ah. Understood. Hate called this affection. Though why it is coming from her I know not. Nevertheless, this charade of a conversation must end. I have humored her for long enough.

"What is it you want, Miss Greengrass?"

The girl adopts a surprised expression.

"Whatever made you think I wanted something from you, Harry?" she smiles innocently, "Can't a girl just want to talk to a boy for the sake of talking?"

"Those girls are rare," I point out, "And naïve to the cruelties of the world. Something I believe you are not, Miss Greengrass."

"Oh my," Daphne's smile grows sweeter, "Should I think that to be a compliment or an insult?"

"I would like to think of it as a compliment," as I say this, the girl moves closer to me, closer than I am uncomfortable with, and I begin to step back, "But if you think it to be an insult, who am I to stop you?"

"Harry," she snags my arm with both of her own. The grip is strong, almost desperate, "why must you mistrust me so? You are friendly with the Veela and Lovegood. Why can't we be the same?"

"I don't know you, Miss Greengrass. We have hardly talked at all in class. Or anywhere for that matter. So excuse me if I think your intent to be less than honorable."

"That is a reasonable assessment," Daphne moves one of her arms from the iron grip and uses it to trace an elegant finger down the side of my cheek. I shiver involuntarily at the pleasurable sensation, "But surely, even one as skeptical as you should admit that it is unfair to base your assumption on just this one thing."

"You are not giving me any reason to do so," I push her away, and am rewarded with a pout, "And the method you are using to try to gain my trust I find highly suspicious. You want something from me. And you are willing to go to great lengths to obtain it."

"Hmm," the girl leans back and gives me a measuring look. I notice that there is respect now in her eyes where there was none before, "Seen right through me have you?"

"You were trying too hard," I say honestly.

She laughs again. It sounds like the tinkling of falling glass.

"You really are something special, Harry. I throw myself at you, quite literally, and the response you give me is 'you were trying too hard'."

I ignore her words.

"What is it you want from me, Miss Greengrass?" I ask for the third time.



Daphne smiles at me. Pretty, but not beautiful. Girly, but not womanly. Inviting, but not provocative. I find myself missing her sneer.

"I want to be your friend."

I am made so incredulous by this simple statement that for a second, all I can do is blink.

"You want to be my friend," I repeat slowly.

"Yes. I do. I want to be your friend, Harry," The way she emphasizes my name would have caused lesser men to glower back in lust. I do not, and the gaze I level towards her can be described as impassive at best.

"This," I say, "is a strange way of making friends."

"To most people, maybe," she returns "But it is the Slytherin way."

Ah. Now I see.

"Offer something in return," I state.

"Take something back," she finishes, and the respect in her eyes grows.

"What will you offer me?"

"My alliance," the girl whispers, "And should you need it, my eyes and ears."

"And what do you ask in return?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing," I say, not sure that I heard right, "You want nothing."

"Nothing except a promise that in the future you will do just one thing I ask."

I pause and digest her request.

"Your demand is very broad in scope, Miss Greengrass," I say after a while.

"I will not ask you to hurt anyone, if that is what you are thinking," she smirks at me, "No matter how good you are at it."

"Rumors, I assure you."

She tosses back her hair, allowing me to see the slender figure of her neck. Pale, flawless skin. A part of me realizes she is doing this on purpose. The other part couldn't care less.

"What will it be?" she asks.

"Friends," I say to myself, uncertain about the idea.

"Friends," Daphne confirms.

There is an old muggle saying. Curiosity killed the cat. There is a less known rejoinder to this saying. Satisfaction brought him back.

I offer my hand to her. She takes it and I can feel the warmth in her palm.

"Then let us be friends, Miss Greengrass," I say.

## Chapter 14: The Weighing of the Wands

"You are improving," the knight said to her. And then it hammered the hilt of its sword into her stomach and sent her sprawling.

Doubled over from the sudden departure of breath from her body, Inase managed to wheeze out a pained gasp before the blade returned, this time point first. The Oriental witch was forced to roll to the side to avoid being impaled to the ground. Inase winced. This brought back memories of when the knight and her first met, when it did impale her into the ground.

As she recovered from her roll, the samurai lashed out with her katana in a wide, sweeping motion, aiming for the thing's plated legs. It was a lightning-quick strike, and one of the best she had produced so far. Against a human foe, the curved blade would have carved through both limbs in a burst of ichor, and left her opponent squirming on the floor, clutching two bloody stumps. The knight was not human, however, and as the blade came for its legs, raised a single foot and stomped down. Its timing was impeccable. The armored boot smashed against the katana's smooth surface and pinned the sword into the dirt. Inase gave a grunt of surprise as her weapon was jolted from her grasp.

In a fluid movement that belied its own massive bulk, the knight swept its own sword upwards, the blade tip kicking up a shower of dirt in the process. It was a devious trick. The earthen spray collided with Inase's face and blinded her. At the same time, the black sword continued singing for her head.

The witch hurled herself backwards, cursing in her native tongue. The long hours she had spent training under her hellish master's tutelage had done much to improve her reflexes, but still it was not enough. The knight was impossibly fast. The tip of its blade caught the right side of her face, drawing a thin red line up her cheek. The pain was a raw, burning sensation, and Inase had to bite her lips to keep from crying out. The woman staggered back, her hand automatically moving to clutch at her wound.

"But you are still far from being acceptable," Hate removed the foot that was pinning her katana and flicked the blade towards her with its own. Inase caught it with her free hand and glowered back.

"Do I even want to know what you deem as acceptable?"

"No," it replied.

"Bastard," the witch grumbled beneath her breath.

"I heard that," the knight responded, though it sounded more amused than angry, "Do be careful with your words, Lotus, less I think you are unappreciative of the instruction I give you."

"Oh yes," she quipped, "How can I be unappreciative of a seven feet tall monstrosity whose idea of training is to think up of as many ways as possible to bleed me dry."

"Your sarcasm needs work, just like your swordsmanship," Inase gritted her teeth when the target of her scorn seemed utterly unaffected, "But even you must admit it has been effective, this method of instruction. You are faster now. More agile. And have learned to be cunning in your strikes. You are a different person than before, Lotus, in mind and body."

The woman said nothing for the knight's words rang true. Instead, she traced the thin gash along her cheek, flinching at the wetness that stained her fingertips. Hate noticed this and chuckled.

"It is remarkable how the human body works. Every inch of skin, every centimeter of muscle all contain the same nerve fibers. They let you discern hot from cold, soft from hard, smooth from rough, and so much more. But most importantly, they let you feel pain," the knight planted its sword into the dirt and stood over it, gauntlets clasped over the rounded pommel, "If hate motivates the mind, then pain motivates the body. Your physique will start to develop differently when agony is constantly applied. Your senses will alert you faster once they taste true pain. Your limbs will do their utmost to avoid it. Your body will fight harder, react sooner, move faster. All because it does not wish to feel pain," Hate allowed another chuckle to escape from its helm, "Fascinating, these shells of flesh you mortals call bodies."

"And you did the same thing to my master? Motivate him with pain?"

"Pain alone achieves nothing," came the stentorian reply, "You must have purpose for pain to do its work, and even then it is no

guarantee. Willpower is involved. Strength of will. Courage of will. Resolve in its purest form. Feeling pain is nothing. You have to be able to weather it. To wear it. And in some cases, to use it."

"Just like hate?"

The knight smiled at her.

"Just like hate."

Inase grunted in response and pulled out her wand. She tapped it lightly against her wounded cheek and sighed in relief when the silent Episkey did its healing work. The pain vanished, leaving behind a cool, dull ache that was infinitely more preferable. Her wand slid back into her robes and she grasped her katana in a two-handed grip. Her feet spread apart, wide in a swordsman's stance. Her eyes narrowed on the plated figure before her, ready for the first blow. It did not come. Instead, the knight merely looked back, its blazing orbs locked onto her face.

"There is something on your mind, Lotus," Inase tried not to look surprised. Hate had an unerring ability to sense a person's moods. If this trait had belonged to any other then she would have thought nothing more of it. But seeing the knight so susceptible human emotion was strange, unusual, and in some ways, frightening, "Allow it to continue to fester and your bladework will falter. Speak, and if I deem it acceptable, I will answer."

The woman nodded stiffly and relaxed, though her mind did not stray far from caution. Her instructor was crafty in its way of war, and she had come to expect its attacks when she was the least prepared. An uncomfortable silence passed between the two as an inner debate raged in her mind. In the end, her desire for an answer emerged triumphant.

"My master," Inase began hesitatingly, "He is not what I expected him to be."

"Oh?" Hate still sounded amused, "And pray tell, what did you expect him to be?"

"Cold and heartless," she replied instantly, "An emotionless killer. Someone who hides his true intent behind a charming mask to get

close to his next victim. Someone who's too cold to be human. Someone who's like a... a..." the witch struggled to find the right description.

"A monster?" the knight finished for her.

Inase blinked at her instructor's strange choice of words.

"Yes... Something like that."

Hate tapped the pommel of its sword with an armored finger. Its posture seemed almost thoughtful.

"And is he not one? He has done terrible things. These you have seen for yourself."

"Yes," Inase swallowed as she remembered the battle in the forest, "At first I thought he was one. The way he smiled as he killed. The way his eyes just looked cold as he slaughtered his way through us. It was utterly terrifying. He seemed so inhuman... so monstrous. I think a part of me back then would have rather fallen on my own blade than submit to him."

"Now that would have been a grand spectacle to witness," the knight said wistfully.

The witch ignored the rather morbid comment.

"But now, I'm not so sure."

"What are you unsure of?" Hate turned to look at her, its eyes glowing an emerald green, "Surely, you are not feeling any sympathy for him?"

"No, not that," Inase hastily amended, "It's just that he doesn't act like a monster."

"Do explain."

"Luna Lovegood."

"The Moon Child? What about her?"

"Look at how he treats her. Almost adoringly. I've seen it before, at the tables and sometimes in the hallways. He seeks to protect her. Like a brother would. And now Luna's almost inseparable from him. In Hogwarts that is. And the most telling part is that he doesn't seem to mind. That doesn't speak of a monster to me."

"Hmm," was all the knight said. Emboldened, Inase continued.

"And look at Miss Delacour. When he came after us in that clearing, he was using spells that were designed to hurt as well as kill. I didn't put much thought into it before, but now, the more I think about it the more it doesn't make sense. It's as though if he was angered at what the men were going to do to her. That was weeks ago, when he had no relationship with her other than the contract. Now, I shudder to think what he would do to those bounty hunters who are foolish enough to try and kidnap her. Monsters don't protect people like that."

"Hmm," Hate said again.

"And look at me," she whispered, "I was ready to stand and watch as a grave crime was about to be committed before my eyes. By all rights he should have slew me in that clearing with the rest of the scum. But he didn't. He spared me, and when I submitted to him, not only did he not take advantage of my status but he sent you, you, the one he trusts the most, to train me, to teach me a way of combat that I would have never learned through other means... Monsters don't do that."

This time, the knight stayed silent.

"It is strange," the woman reflected, "For all those monstrous things you say he did, he still seems human. Compassionate almost."

A faint wailing sound was the only warning she got. Inase's eyes grew wide as Hate's sword sang for her neck. She ducked down hurriedly, and the blade that would have hewn her head from her shoulders grazed millimeters away from the top of her scalp. The stink of burning ozone entered her nostrils and she looked up in horror as the knight's weapon returned for another swing.

It was on fire.

The sword's edges were aglow with emerald flames, the blade's surface a raging storm of hissing, spitting fire that howled as it carved through the air. Inase brought her own sword to bear, barely in time to meet the knight's strike. The two blades met with a ringing clang, and locked together. Hate leered down at her, its eyes angry and malevolent.

"You would do well in the future," it growled into her face, "to keep that sort of opinion to yourself."

Inase craned her head away. At such close proximity, the flames were threatening to singe her cheeks.

"U-Understood."

"Do you?" the knight hissed, "Do you truly understand, Lotus?"

The steel boot smashed against her stomach, sending her hurtling back. Her surroundings blurred and then jarred discordantly when her back impacted hard against the ground.

"Do not think you know him as I know him," Hate snarled as it stomped for her, the burning blade clasped solidly in one hand as it approached, "Do not think you understand him as I understand him. Do not think he needs your sympathy. Do not think he needs your pity. Do not think at all, Lotus, for your thoughts border close to what he does not need."

The black sword came down, the flames leaving rippling contours in the air as it descended. The blade cleaved deep into the earth between her legs. Inase gulped as the emerald fire charred the surrounding ground into a darkened, fused mess. She had to scabble back further when the inferno threatened to consume her as well.

"Compassion did not make me," the knight's grip shifted to the pommel, plated digits encompassing it like a king's hold on a scepter, "Love did not bind my soul to these bones. Empathy did not forge me this suit of plate or gift me this blade. You think he is no monster. There is some truth in that regard. But never forget that he was capable of summoning me. Never forget that when he called for help all those years ago, it was not an angel that answered but a warrior in midnight clad."



The fire along the blade extinguished, vanishing in a soft, lethal hiss that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Thick trails of black smoke drifted up from the ground where Hate's sword had cleaved, leaving a blackened, glassy crater to greet her disbelieving eyes. Again Inase was reminded of the knight's strange behavior; docile and understanding at some times while lethal and deadly at others. What bothered her the most though, was its ability to shift between the two at a whim. It made it seem that much less human. The thought brought another question to the bounty hunter's lips, one she had been afraid to ask ever since she had given her loyalty to the boy.

"Would you have killed me?" Inase breathed, voicing her fears for the first time, "Back in that forest?"

The knight regarded her for a moment, as though if judging whether she deserved a response or not.

"I would have."

The witch nodded to herself. She had expected this response, but the fact that the knight had admitted it directly and without hesitation still frightened her to no end.

"Why?" she was proud her voice managed to hide her fear.

"Blood is blood, Lotus," Hate rasped back, "It does not matter whose blood is shed, as long as it is shed. I care not for such fickle things such as morality or gender. Were you a saint, beloved by your comrades and adored by the people, I would have still slain you and left your body to rot like a common criminal's."

The bounty hunter shivered involuntarily at the frankness in her instructor's words.

"And yet your lord did not."

"Our lord," the knight corrected.

"Our lord," Inase repeated, hating how naturally the title rolled from her tongue.

"He did not because he is not me."

The witch waited, hoping for more than such a vague, disappointing answer. When no more words came, she furrowed her brows.

"I am left unsatisfied," she murmured, "But then again, I am not surprised that this came from you."

"Life," Hate growled through its helm, "is nothing more than a series of unsatisfying events. I am merely following the cycle that Life ordains."

Inase snorted.

"And yet our lord doesn't follow this cycle. Why else would he have sent you to teach me?"

The knight chuckled darkly.

"A minor fault in one riddled with valuable traits."

"So you admit then," the witch smiled triumphantly, "That there is some compassion in him."

Inase assumed Hate would respond with a threatening growl or even swing its blade at her again. Instead, its response was in the form of a question.

"What is a knight, Lotus?"

She paused, momentarily caught off-guard.

"I don't see how that has to do with anything-"

"What is a knight?" Hate asked again, its fiery gaze piercing her like twin spears.

"A warrior who fights for honor? For glory? A nobleman clad in plate armor?"

"In some ways you are correct," the armored figure said slowly, "Knights, the real ones, have fought for both honor and glory before. Some have even fought for petty things like money and women. But

these are not the knights I speak of. What I am speaking of are the knights of legends. The warriors in the stories of old. The men whose legacies you humans inscribe into your histories as fact when they are mere fiction."

"I don't see-"

"Knights fight for what is right, Lotus," it interrupted her, "They fight for justice. They fight for the weak. They fight for people like you, who have sinned because of naivety, to give you one more chance to make things right."

Inase had no immediate words to use to reply to that. Hate smiled at her silence.

"Disgusting, no? This nobility. This feigned dignity. How wild you humans' imaginations are, to have dreamed of such beings when none exist in reality."

"No," she found her voice. It sounded soft and hesitant, even to her own ears, "Not disgusting. But still... Still it makes no sense. By your own definition you are not a knight. Your actions are entirely the opposite... Unless... Unless you are not talking about yourself..."

The bounty hunter paused at the implications.

"And that is the mystery, isn't it?" Hate said to her. Inase had an eerie feeling that the smile was growing under its horned helm, "Which one of us is the knight? The one who looks like one? Or the one who acts like one?"

There was a tradition to the Triwizard Tournament, a long-lasting custom almost as old as the tournament itself. It was called the Weighing of the Wands, implemented long ago to prevent champions from imbuing their wands with dark magics to gain an unfair advantage in the completion. Over the centuries, as the tournament became less and less dangerous, this tradition changed as well, becoming less practical and more ceremonial. And so, the four champions of the Triwizard Tournament stood outside of the thick wooden doors, waiting for their wands to be judged by the most famous wandmaker in magical Britain.

Viktor Krum leaned against the stone wall, silent, brooding. His sour mood blanketed him like a cloak, and the other champions kept away from him, wary of the heavy atmosphere that surrounded the Chosen of Durmstrang.

Cedric Diggory stood the nearest to the door, his handsome features twisted into a bemused expression. Being selected as champion was still raw and heavy on his mind, and though he had shed the initial fear, there was still much riding on his shoulders.

Fleur Delacour sat waiting on a nearby bench. She was the only one that was smiling. It was clear why. A boy sat next to her, black-haired and emerald-eyed, not close enough to suggest anything intimate, but close enough to prevent others from being intimate with her.

Harry Potter, youngest of the four, nodded in return to the Beauxbaton champion's whispered words and responded with a few of his own. Nothing to suggest intimacy, but again nothing to suggest anything against it as well.

The door opened, and the champions stopped whatever they were doing. Krum was the first one in, scowling as his footsteps took him through the entrance. Cedric was next, looking back uncertainly before going in. Fleur and her bodyguard were the last, the two moving in together.

Waiting for them were a row of seats, clearly meant for them. At the room's corner, an old man sat, features weathered and crinkly. His white hair was a stark contrast to the black suit he wore, and the way he carried himself spoke of a refined elegance that was not normal with age. Standing a few feet away was a woman, talking animatedly with a man with an outdated camera. She was gesturing, pointing, and the man was nodding so fast that his head resembled a bobblehead doll. Her choice of attire was curiously garish, consisting of a bright green dress that looked like it was made from leather. The heavy spectacles she wore, covered with rhinestones, didn't help either. The woman turned as the champions walked in and smiled a provocative smile.

"It appears, Ludo, that our esteemed champions have arrived," she remarked.

"Yes, yes!" Bagman was rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, obviously excited, "Welcome, champions, to the Weighing of the Wands! If the four of you will have a seat, we can commence with the ceremony!"

Three of the champions found their way to the chairs and sat down. One did not and regarded the other occupants of the room.

"What are you doing here?" Harry Potter said.

"Auror duties, son," James Potter smiled uneasily back, "Sirius is here as well. We're here to guard the champions."

The boy's gaze shifted to the second auror, who gave a hesitant wave. His eyes roamed between the two and focused on the woman that was standing slightly behind James, almost hidden by her husband's tall frame.

"And her?"

The auror captain pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose.

"She's here because she wants to be here, Harry," he said softly.

There was a moment of silence, a pregnant pause. And then the boy spoke.

"Professors," he smiled innocently, "are prohibited from viewing the Weighing of the Wands. They are a biased party, who may very well use the valuable information about the champions' wands to aid their own school's champion. It may be for the best, James, if she were to leave. In the fairness of the competition."

"Harry..." Lily murmured painfully.

"She wants to be here," James said again, sterner this time.

"What right do you have to that decision?" Harry returned smoothly, "You are not a judge of this competition. You hold no authority over the tournament yourself. She should be gone, whether she wants to be here or not."

"James," Lily whispered hesitantly, "Perhaps it would be the best if I-

"No Lils," her husband said firmly, "You're staying," the auror captain turned to his son, "This operation is under my command, and under my command I can deem it necessary if someone stays or not, depending on their special expertise."

"And what expertise will a Muggle Studies professor have on a matter strictly about wands?"

James wavered briefly from the boy's direct question.

"That," he finally managed, "is strictly confidential."

Harry regarded him with a look that bordered close to mocking, even though his smile was still pleasant.

"I'm surprised, James. You're not trying to hide abusing your auror powers? What ever happened to the blustering fool I knew so well?"

The auror winced.

"That man has been dead for a while," he said quietly, and then paused to look earnestly back at the boy, "And he won't be back again. I'm not trying to hide anything from you, Harry. Not anymore."

The boy smiled again.

"How noble," he said simply.

All three adults cringed. Harry continued to stare at them, and would most likely have persisted for a long while when a soft voice called for him from the back.

"Harry," Fleur said again, her eyes on the boy's back. There was no request in her tone, no steely demand or girlish pout. The way she said it meant support, comfort, and in response, her bodyguard's smile twitched at the corners.

Harry turned from his parents with methodical slowness and made his way towards the quarter-Veela's side. He sat down mechanically and looked away. None missed the way Fleur's hand immediately

settled over the boy's. None also missed that the boy did not shirk from her touch.

Lily looked almost jealous.

"Well, now that's all settled," the woman with the beetle glasses said winningly, "Let us start, shall we?"

"Errr... right," Bagman had been staring slack jawed as the drama had unfolded. The woman's words brought him out of his stupor and the former quidditch star closed his mouth a little too quick. Everyone could hear his muffled curses as he bit the inside of his cheek, "Ow! Damn it! Of all the accursed times!"

The woman rolled her eyes.

"Still clumsy as ever, Ludo?"

"Clumsy?" Bagman appeared amused, "Why, I have not a clue what you mean, Rita. I am the very definition of gracefulness! I was a star beater for the Wasps, after all!"

"A beater isn't exactly the most elegant position on a quidditch team, Ludo," was Rita's glib reply, "And the years you've spent outside of the pitch haven't helped either," the woman inclined her head towards Bagman's rather pronounced belly.

Like an overweight cat caught with its paw in a jar of treats, Bagman managed to look both innocent and guilty at the same time.

"All I'm missing are a few exercises. A few laps around the pitch and I'll be back into shape in no time!"

"Hmm," the woman said back, clearly disbelieving, "In any case, I do think that we have dallied on your quidditch career long enough. I think introductions are in order."

"Ah yes!" Bagman exclaimed, "And to think I had nearly forgotten!" the portly man chuckled at his own joke and then stopped when he realized no one else was laughing, "Well then... Where were we? Right. The enchanting witch you see before you is none other than Rita Skeeter! Known for the few articles she has written for the Daily Prophet!"

"Well," Rita's words for Ludo, though her eyes lingered on Harry, "perhaps more than a few."

"Yes, yes," Bagman said cheerily, "And up next we have Garrick Ollivander, Britain's very best wandmaker! He'll be the one judging your wands, so make sure you've polished them well!"

The wizened man sitting in the corner nodded solemnly.

"It will be an honor."

The rest of the room expected Bagman to introduce the man with the camera next. Instead, he took a step towards the door.

"If that is everything," Bagman said cheerfully, "I will be leaving. An appointment with the goblins, you see. Very nose lot, they are."

"Are they after your debts again?" Rita showed her perfect white teeth in a dazzling smile, "You really shouldn't have gambled away your quidditch fortune, Ludo. Though perhaps an article of mine will bring you some sympathy from the public. An interview, perhaps? After the Weighing?"

"I really don't know what you're talking about," the man tugged at his collar nervously, "The goblins are just discussing with me the financial situation of my vaults, nothing more. There's plenty of galleons left in the Bagman treasury!"

Bagman laughed again, though it sounded rather feeble in comparison to the last time.

"Of course," the reporter said silkily, "I won't keep you from your appointment any longer."

"Right then," Ludo waved at the occupants of the room, "I'll see you all at the First Task. Good luck to you champions, and may the best man or woman win!"

The former quidditch star was out the door faster than anyone can blink.



"Now that the comedic relief is gone," Rita said distastefully, her eyes flickering back to Harry, "The Weighing can truly begin. Mr. Ollivander?"

The old wandmaker stood up from his seat with a small nod and made his way to the front of the room, where the single table resided. In the meantime, Rita had produced a quill from her purse, white-feathered and clearly enchanted. The writing implement hovered over her palm before floating to her shoulder where it lingered like a tamed hawk.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Skeeter!" Sirius's angry voice broke in. The auror's gaze was riveted to the quill, and his face was distorted in fury.

"Auror Black," the reporter replied curtly, "I'm going to write an article about the Weighing of the Wands," her lips curled, "What did you think I was going to do?"

"Not with that you aren't!" Sirius pointed to the quill which in response fled behind Rita's back, "That Quick-Quotes Quill of yours have ruined too many lives for me to count, including my friends!"

"The public have a right to know, Black. It is no fault of my own that your friends were less than stellar parents."

"Why you-"

"Sirius," James pulled his friend back, "Don't let her get to you. What's in the past is in the past."

"But James! That bitch completely trashed your reputation! Her sorry excuse for an article made all your friends leave overnight!"

"Yeah, well, all the good ones came back, didn't they?" Sirius swallowed and looked angrily away. James turned from him and leveled a heated gaze at the reporter, "I don't care what you write about us, but you're not going to write a damn thing about Harry," at his side, Lily nodded fervently, "I'll make sure of it."

"You'll make sure of it?" Rita said mockingly, "Why, I do believe those are threatening words," the quill over her shoulder dropped down to her hand, where a sheaf of parchment waited and

immediately began to scribble words into the paper, "Watch yourself, Auror Potter. There are many secrets about your family that I haven't revealed yet. It would be a shame if I had to use them over such a petty argument."

"We have no secrets left," James growled, "You made sure of that."

The reporter smiled.

"I can always create more."

"You little-

"Uhumph," Ollivander cleared his throat loudly and interrupted Sirius's rant before it could begin, "I still have wands left to categorize back in my shop. If we could continue without further delay?"

Both sides backed down, albeit reluctantly.

"Excellent," the wandmaker stood behind the table, eyes unblinking as he stared at his audience, "Now who will be the first?"

"I vill."

Viktor Krum rose from his seat and stalked towards the front of the room. He presented his wand to the old wizard who took it gingerly from the Durmstrang champion's hand.

"Ahhh. One of Gregorovitch's creations, I see. Ten and a quarter inch. Hornbeam wood with a dragon heartstring for a core. Very rigid, as is his style. Thicker than the norm as well. But that is to be expected. Gregorovitch crafts his wands to be sturdier when used. More reliable in a way, though it lacks the elegance and finesse I am used to."

Ollivander shifted his grip so that he held the wand by its haft. He flicked it once and a loud booming sound, like that of a cannon, erupted from the tip. Everyone blinked at the display and then looked back, to the back of the room, where a circular scorch mark had been burned into the wall.

The wandmaker smiled.

"A very eager wand, you have here, Mr. Krum. Good for dueling. Used offensively and it will have few others in its league."

"Thank you," Viktor said, and took the offered wand back. He made his way back to row of seats and sat down without a second look towards his fellow champions.

"Next?" Ollivander gestured.

Cedric Diggory rose unsteadily and walked for the table. The Hufflepuff smiled shakily as he presented his wand to the wizened man.

"Very good, Mr. Diggory," Ollivander commented and ran a finger across the wand's gleaming surface, "Do you polish your wand frequently?"

"Every other day," Cedric smiled again, with more confidence this time.

"Excellent. One should always polish his or her wand at every opportunity," at the wandmaker's words, Sirius adopted a sheepish look and hid his own wand in the sleeve of his robe, "It is the very basics of wandcare, and polishing it at least once a week will prolong your wand's lifetime."

"Thank you, sir," the Hogwarts champion beamed.

"Hmm. This one is one of mine. Twelve and a quarter inch. Ash wood and a string of hair from the tail of a unicorn. Ah yes. I remember this wand well. You were just starting Hogwarts when Amos brought you into my shop. It took us a few tries to find one just right for you. The wand chooses the wizard after all."

Ollivander dipped the wand in a vertical, cutting motion, and the bright, golden hue of a perfectly casted Protego appeared, shining a shimmering light that danced towards the corners of the room.

"Unicorns are a compassionate species," the old man remarked, "And thus, this wand is kindly in nature. It excels at defensive spells and all sorts of charms. Powerful in its own way, but highly dependent on how the owner chooses to use it. I hope, Mr. Diggory,

you are never in a situation where you have to betray your wand's true nature."

Cedric nodded in acceptance.

"Thank you, sir," he said and walked back towards his seat.

"Next?"

Fleur Delacour stood up regally and made her way up front. Ollivander delicately picked the wand up from the quarter-Veela's palm and held it closely to his face.

"The maker of this wand escapes me," he admitted after a while, "Custom made, I presume?"

"Oui," the girl replied, "It was made for me when I was little."

"I see. Nine and a half inches. Rosewood, I believe. And the core is..." the wandmaker's eyes flickered briefly, "... a strand of Veela hair?"

"Oui," Fleur said again, "One of my grandmuzzer's."

"Irregular, but useable," Ollivander tapped the wand against the table and in response a bouquet of roses sprang from the wooden surface. Two more taps, and the entire table was covered with the crimson flowers.

"Whoever made this wand knew his craft well. Very stiff. Inflexible, almost. But it has to be. The choice of core is volatile, emotional in a way, and as a result requires a sturdier vessel than most," the wandmaker gave the girl an inquisitive stare, "What you have here is a very passionate wand, Miss Delacour. Though I suspect you already know that."

"I do," Fleur smiled, though it was directed towards the boy and not at Ollivander.

"Good. Always know your wand like the back of your hand. As it is, your wand excels at nothing, but fails at nothing as well. A jack of all trades, master of none sort of thing. Of course that can all change. Custom made wands are like that. Changing in tune to its wielder's

emotions," a ghost of a smile flitted over the man's crinkled face, "It just depends on how you feel."

The quarter-Veela blushed.

"Zank you," she said and walked back towards her seat with wand in hand.

"Next?"

Harry Potter stood up and strode for the table. Something dark and heavy spun in his palm, rigid like a wand but with a tip pointed like the end of a spear. He stopped in front of the wandmaker, the blackened length spinning one last time before coming to a rest, handle first towards the wizened man. The wandmaker took it from him as though it was worth its weight in gold.

For the first time since the Weighing began, Ollivander's eyes shone.

"Steel," he breathed, "This is steel."

"Steel?" Rita crossed her arms and the faint scratching of her Quick-Quotes Quill could be heard, "That's impossible. You can't make wands out of steel. Only wood."

Ollivander ignored the reporter and continued to focus on the wand in his hands.

"Twelve inches. No curves. No indentations. Ramrod straight. Hmm. Interesting. Very interesting. I wonder what type of core it contains," he waved the wand and frowned when nothing came out. He tapped it on the table next. Again, nothing, "Now this is a predicament. It seems that his wand refuses to respond to me."

"A dud? A fake wand perhaps?" the Quick-Quotes Quill over Rita's shoulder began to write even more frenziedly, "My, my, what a story this will make. The fourth champion bringing a fake wand to the Weighing. An insult to the tournament. The public will be quite scandalized."

James and Sirius growled low in their throats. They both started when Lily made the same sound from behind them.

"No. Not fake," Ollivander rolled the wand between his fingers, scrutinizing every inch of its smooth surface, "There is magic in this wand. I can feel it. Faint, but distinct. It just does not react to me," the man's eyes turned to the boy, "Perhaps, Mr. Potter, a demonstration from you is in order?"

Harry nodded silently. He took back his wand, both hands gripped on the handle so the pointed end was directed down. The boy didn't incant a spell. He didn't even blink. The wand changed without warning, flowing like molten silver as it remade itself into the image its master desired. Its sides flattened out into a pair of razor sharp edges. Its tip broadened but retained the killing point. Its length extended, shooting downwards until it was arrested with a dull thud by the wooden table. The sound caused everyone to jump.

"Sweet Merlin," Cedric gaped.

A sword, fully three and a half feet long, stood in the boy's hands. Its black surface gleamed like polished obsidian, with sides straighter than a ruler's edge. Where the boy had gripped the wand before, there was now a handle, complete with a solid, round pommel above and a crossguard below, shaped into a perfect heraldic cross. A masterwork weapon, a sword that champion warriors would have slain hundreds of challengers to keep, and a blade that collectors would go whole lifetimes without seeing.

Harry smiled thinly at the astonished expressions in the room.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Ollivander clapped his hands together heartily, "Extraordinary! Simply extraordinary! A wand that can be transfigured into a completely different object! How clever! How simply astounding!"

The boy shrugged.

"If you wouldn't mind, Mr. Potter? To change it back into its original form? I believe I have a thesis on how it works."

"As you wish," Harry replied simply, and as fast it had changed into a sword, the length of steel turned back, flowing into a wand once more. The boy offered it to the wandmaker, who treated it with even more reverence than before.

"Interesting..."

"You can't make wands out of steel," Rita cut in, though she looked a bit pale this time, "I've never heard of such a thing. There hasn't been a single wand made out of steel in our recorded history."

"And that is the reason why it is so interesting, Ms. Skeeter," Ollivander said as he held the blackened length of metal for all to see, "For what I am holding in my hand should be an impossibility. Is an impossibility. Yet it exists, and it works. How very strange," the old wandmaker's fingers ghosted along the haft, trembling with age but also strangely elegant, "I wonder..." his eyes widened, and the fingers that were dancing across the wand's surface stilled to a stop, "It could be... It very well could be..." everyone in the room watched in stunned surprise as Ollivander nicked his thumb on the pointed end and allowed a drop of blood from the wound to run along the wand's edge, "Yes. Yes. I see now. Blood... The core of this wand is blood."

Eyes turned to the boy. He smiled again and nodded in agreement.

"My own."

A dry reedy sound caused attention to switch back to the front of the room. Ollivander was laughing. A thin, cackling chuckle escaped the man's lips, sounding like the ruffling of aged parchment. Eyes stared. Ollivander never laughed.

"This..." the old wandmaker grinned eerily to his audience, "is something unprecedented. It is a marvel," he held up the wand again, "and something I have not seen for a lifetime."

"If it is a marvel, why don't you explain?" Rita tapped her foot impatiently, "I'm sure we'd all like to know."

"Of course, Ms. Skeeter. But give me a moment. It is not usual for us wand crafters to have to explain our work to our customers in such detail," Ollivander paused and tapped his chin thoughtfully before beginning again, "Wands are never made out of steel, or iron, or any metal. They are inert objects. Lifeless. Dead. They are an anathema of what magic is. Living. Flowing. Magic is attuned to life, and it can be wielded only by the living. This is precisely the reason why Necromancers went out of existence hundreds of years ago. They

sought to meld magic with the dead, but the most they could manage were the Inferi. Human bodies that were animated by magic but could not cast it. It was their greatest triumph, but also their ultimate defeat. For in order to use magic, a core must exist. Once a person is dead, their core is extinguished forever. What the Necromancers sought to do was to imbue a core in a dead body, so the corpse could use magic as its master dictated. They never accomplished that, for to create a new core in something that is already dead is impossible. You cannot create magic. You can only use what exists in your core and your surroundings."

"We're here for an explanation, Ollivander, not a history lesson," Rita said rudely, "Let's get to the point shall we? Time is money after all."

"All in good time, Ms. Skeeter, all in good time" the wandmaker seemed utterly unaffected by the journalist's brusqueness and continued on as normal, "The wand is a conduit. It is an implement that links your own core to the environment. In a sense, your own core is powering up the core in the wand, which then allows the transfer of magic to the outside world. Or in simpler terms, spells. The theory is complicated, and we can debate for hours on end about the finer details as many masters in my profession often do," Ollivander halted and scratched idly at his scalp, "It is hard to come up with an adequate analogy, but I think I have one. Think of the wand as a key, and the magical core, a door. Without the key, you cannot open the door. Without the door, the key is nothing but an ornament."

The hand that had been holding the wand let go, and the length of blackened steel hung in midair, spinning slowly in place.

"But for the key to unlock the door, they must share the same element. A wizard's magical core is a living, pulsating thing. Its very existence is synonymous with life. And that is why a wand must be made from living material. Wood is one of them. Birch. Oak. Elm. All possible sources of a wand. Likewise, the cores of each wand must all belong to something that was living, or once living, whether it be a string of Veela hair or the feather of a phoenix. All living elements. All components of life. A wand has to be living to do magic. It is one of the fundamental laws of our kind."

Ollivander gestured to the floating implement in front of him.



"This," he smiled, "is not living. But neither is it dead."

"You mean like undead?" Sirius blurted out.

"Black," the wandmaker stared at the auror captain unnervingly, "Fifteen inches. Oak. With a core of consisting of the heartstring of a slain griffon. Very powerful wand I sold you. Very rare too. Your father was most proud."

"Errr... thanks," Sirius shifted uncomfortably.

"To answer your question," Ollivander turned his attention back to the wand, "no, it is not undead. For something to be undead, it must first die and then be raised back. The wand you see here was never alive in the first place," the wizened man tapped the metal rod lightly, "Steel, as I have said before, is an inert medium. It is a lifeless material. But that is its only limitation. Steel has many properties that make it a very attractive alternative to wood. It is far stronger. Far more durable as well. An excess of magic in a wooden wand can cause it to explode into fragments. With steel, such a thing is impossible. It is also a sturdier container for the core. Wooden wands often leak out magic from their bodies. This is why spells like the Prior Incantato are effective. Because they can detect the magical signature staining the outside of the wand. Steel will prevent that from happening," Sirius and James shared a significant look between them and then stared mutually at Harry, "Its very nature halts the flow of magic, yet it is still strong enough to contain it. A very interesting medium, steel is. It is a shame that wizarding kind has not yet devised a way to utilize it."

"Well you have a working example don't you?" Rita gestured to the floating length of steel, "Surely you can base future wands off Mr. Potter's. Cause a revolution in the wandmaking business. I can even write an article about it. Of course you'll have to make do with being on the second or third page. No one wants to read about wands on the first page. No offense, of course."

Ollivander shook his head.

"You don't understand. I can't replicate it. Much less copy it," seeing the disbelieving looks around him, the wizened man grinned, "I can only create wands that are in line with the laws of magic. Very stringent those laws are, and it is one of the great tragedies of my

profession that I cannot experiment outside those boundaries. Alas, it is a curse all wandmakers bear. This wand, however, cheats those same laws, and quite extravagantly I might add."

"Cheat?" Rita's eyes gleamed, "As in illegal? Are you saying by chance, Mr. Ollivander, that the fourth champion's wand is illegal?"

James snarled in anger and glared daggers at the reporter, who merely smiled sweetly in return.

"Anything my son does," he spat, "is not illegal."

"Now that's up for the public to decide, Mr. Potter," the woman remarked offhandedly, "Unless you were implying that your opinion is above that of the public's?" the Quick-Quotes Quill immediately began to scribble even more fervently over her shoulder.

"Give it up, James," this time, it was Sirius that laid a soothing hand over his friend's arm, "She'll just blow everything out of proportion again."

"James," Lily pleaded softly.

The auror deflated visibly and looked down with a grimace.

"Where were we?" Rita smirked as she directed her gaze back at Ollivander, "Oh yes. The esteemed wandmaker was just going to tell us how Mr. Potter's wand is illegal."

"Illegal?" Ollivander blinked twice at the insinuation, "Yes, it certainly seems that way doesn't it? But I'm sorry to say, Ms. Skeeter, that Mr. Potter's wand cannot be described as illegal by any laws I know of."

The reporter narrowed her eyes.

"But you just said his wand cheats the law."

"The laws of magic," the wandmaker emphasized, "Not magical laws. There is a significant difference, Ms. Skeeter. What Mr. Potter's wand breaks are the laws of nature, not the laws made by politicians at a session of the Wizengamot."

"But surely, there must be some detrimental effect, some negative consequence?" Rita sounded almost desperate as she peered at Ollivander over her glasses, "It is still breaking a law."

The man in question frowned in disapproval, showing the first signs of being truly agitated.

"I'm afraid you'll be disappointed, Ms. Skeeter, if you wish to use Mr. Potter's wand as a source for your articles. What he has done is both innovative in design and brilliant in creativity. Many academic circles around the magical world would be willing to part with a great deal of money to just examine his wand."

The reporter sulked, but stayed silent.

"Now where were we?" Ollivander returned to examining the wand, "Ah, yes. We were going to discuss how this cheats the law of magic. The answer lies within the core. All of you are familiar with blood-magic, yes? One of the strongest branches of magic known to wizarding kind. Very potent, but also extremely volatile. It is banned in many magical nations for precisely that reason. The benefits do not outweigh the costs. But in the case of this wand, I daresay it is the opposite. Blood, you see, makes for a very strong catalyst. It carries the magic in our bodies, vessels, in a way, and logic dictates that such potent a material creates powerful cores. The problem is blood is too powerful, too strong. Wood cannot contain it. Any attempts in the past mixing blood and wood have resulted in the wand rupturing under the strain, sometimes with catastrophic results. Many aspiring wandmakers, too confident in their own abilities or just plain foolish, have died when their experimentations exploded quite forcibly in their faces."

At this, Lily let out a horrified gasp, and the two men by her side looked suddenly ill. Their reactions did not match a certain girl's however. Fleur bit her lips, clutching the sides of her chair so hard that the wood began making strangled, creaking noises. Cedric Diggory shot her an alarmed look and started edging his seat away from hers. Krum just snorted and returned to staring at the wand in Ollivander's hand.

"I imagine, Mr. Potter, that your wand took more than one try to make," the wandmaker said gravely.

"The first time I tried," Harry replied with a smile, "I nearly blew off my left hand."

Both Sirius and James swore out loud. Lily staggered back, hand over her chest, breathing hard. Rita Skeeter looked delighted and actually snatched her Quick-Quotes Quill out of midair so she could add in her own choice words. Again, their reactions were outmatched by Fleur's. The quarter-Veela's fingers strained against the bottom of her chair, and soon, a visible crack ripped across the wooden seat's surface.

"One of the more negative attributes in being a wandmaker," the old man said dryly.

The boy merely smiled again.

"Now, blood alone will not make this wand work," Ollivander continued, "Steel remains an inert medium, no matter how strong the core is inside. What is needed is a bit of trickery. To make the core believe it resides in wood and for the steel to believe it is wood. But to do that, very complicated magic must be involved. Charms must be cast on both the wand and the core. Wards must be placed so that the charms will never deteriorate. A long and drawn out process, it will take. Weeks, months, maybe even years to complete. And that is if it succeeds. What Mr. Potter has done is quite extraordinary. He has circumvented the process altogether. For what I have described to you is the creation of a steel wand. Such a process is not needed if what Mr. Potter seeks to create is not a wand at all," the man's lined face turned to stare at Harry, "This is no wand. It is a projection of your own core."

"That is an easy way of saying it," the boy said back.

Ollivander cackled.

"All of you were awake when I mentioned that two cores are needed to do magic, yes? One in the wand and one in yourself. The core within you sends magic into the core of the wand, which then materializes the magic into spells, or charms, or curses. The blood, in this case, acts only as a catalyst. This wand has no core. The blood within it carries the magic the same way it carries magic when flowing through our bodies. What Mr. Potter wields is not a mere wand, but an extension of his own body, channeled through the

protective layers of steel, and controlled by the steel's innate sturdiness," the wandmaker saw the confused faces arrayed before him and cackled again, "Or to put it more simply, whenever Mr. Potter does magic, he does not draw upon the energies from around him or from his wand, but from his own magical core."

"And there is a difference?" Sirius whispered, "In drawing magic from your own core?"

"Certainly, Mr. Black," Ollivander smiled, "Blood magic is powerful yet volatile. Drawing magic from one's own core is several steps above that," hearing the intake of breaths from around him, the aged man shook his head, "The danger from using magic from the core is one of overtaxation. A normal wizard can cast as many spells as he wishes in a day and his core will sustain him, as long as he casts them every once in a while. But force him to cast frequently, over a short period of time, and he will perhaps last thirty minutes before collapsing. Take the same wizard and give him a way to access his own core while forcing the same test on him, and he will last two minutes at the very best. Of course, there are also other differences. The wizard drawing magic from his wand's core will eventually get better. He has merely exhausted the core in his wand, and with time, he will heal. The wizard using his own core, however, will never get up again. The core within a wand can be replaced. The core within a person, not so much. I hope you are aware of this fact, Mr. Potter."

Harry met the wandmaker's stare, still smiling, and shrugged.

"I have come to terms with it," he remarked noncommittally.

Ollivander nodded solemnly, and handed the boy his wand back.

"It truly was an honor to judge your wand, Mr. Potter," the aged wizard inclined his head slightly in respect, "But now, I have a question for you."

Harry twirled the wand between his fingers, spinning it in a blur before pocketing it back into his robes.

"You know I will say no, Mr. Ollivander."

"Yes, I know. But it is harmless to let an old man hope, yes?"

"Very well, sir," the boy's tone was unfalteringly polite, "You may ask your question."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," the wandmaker said sincerely and then adopted a solemn look, "Would it be at all possible for me to take your wand back to my shop and study it for a few days? I can give you a magical oath that it will come back to you in perfect condition."

"This wand has seen me through thick and thin, Mr. Ollivander," Harry's face was just as solemn, "It would be most preferable if it stayed by my side, though I will think about lending it to you in the future should I not need it."

"Ah. So I will take your answer to be never, then."

"I didn't say never, sir," the boy's expression was innocent, "I just said should I not need it."

"A wizard always needs his wand," the old man chided softly, "Your answer may very well have been never."

Harry smiled.

"I'm glad, then, Mr. Ollivander, that we could come to an answer we both agree on."

The wandmaker chuckled ruefully.

"If all young men are like you, then I think the next few years will be very interesting."

He turned to the rest of the room.

"Today has been a interesting day. I have handled three powerful wands, and one very unique one. I will make many a wandmaker jealous with the tales I will tell," the man bowed low, "I wish all of you luck in the tournament. Farewell."

With that, Ollivander strode for the door and disappeared with the faint creak of iron hinges.

For a moment, silence permeated the room, its occupants unsure of how to proceed without the presence of the wandmaker.

"Ahem," Rita Skeeter coughed into her hand, "Now that business has been all taken care of," she clapped her hands twice, "Pictures! Photos for the Daily Prophet!"

The man with the outdated camera immediately made his way to the front of the room.

"Here, please," he said, "Together, if you will. And later on we can do singles."

The three champions moved from their seats to join the fourth by the table. Before they could reach him, however, Rita took him by the arm and dragged the boy aside.

"Harry," she smiled seductively, "After the photo shoot, I'm sure you and I can agree to an interview. I'll make your face the front page of tomorrow's paper as a reward."

The boy made to answer when another arm reached out and grasped his shoulder.

"You aren't going to do anything of the sort," Sirius Black growled as he stood defensively behind Harry, "You can get your next story from someone else."

By the auror's side, James and Lily hovered, too afraid to be near their son, but still protective of him.

"That, Auror Black," Rita smirked, "isn't up to you to decide."

Sirius glared at the reporter before spinning the boy around. He kneeled, both hands gripping Harry's shoulder.

"Look, cub," he said softly, "I know you're still angry. I would be in your place too. But damn it, this isn't the way to deal with it. Rita embellishes all her articles. Fakes all of her stories so they can sell. If you agree to that interview, she'll twist your words and make your entire family out to be villains!"

"But aren't they?" the boy regarded the auror with a neutral stare, "It's quite evil of them to neglect their own child. I'm sure you can agree with me on that."

Sirius winced, but his hold on his godson remained firm.

"They've gone through this once before. The public descended on them like jackals. All the friends they thought they had turned their backs on them overnight. Once is enough. Please, Harry," the man pleaded, "Don't make them go through this again."

"Your words," Harry placed a hand on one of Sirius's and pried it loose, "will be taken into consideration."

Rita leered at the scene before her.

"A fine son you didn't raise. Developed a mind of his own. If I were you, I would be proud."

Sirius ignored her and looked at Harry with begging eyes.

"Please, Harry-"

"Are you going to remove your other hand, Sirius? Or am I going to have to do it for you?"

The auror was about to argue when James pulled him back.

"It's fine, Sirius," he said reassuringly, "We'll be fine."

"James! Did you forget what happened when that damned article came out? Do you want a repeat of that to happen?"

"No, but if it makes Harry feel better, then we won't protest," the man smiled sadly at the boy, "If you want to say anything to her son, then go ahead with it. We've hurt you enough already, and if this will give you some relief from the pain, then we won't try to stop you."

Harry stared back.

"How noble," he repeated with the same mocking smile.

Rita smirked in victory.

"I will wait for you, Mr. Potter, when the photos are done."



The room is small and cramped, with barely enough space for the two chairs placed within. I think she chose this room on purpose. The distance between us is comfortable enough for conversation to flow naturally, but such close proximity can lead to anxiety over time. Inwardly, I smile. A potent tactic in the arsenal of a reporter. To make the victim believe firmly she is on their side while maintaining the illusion that there is a need to tell the whole story. Sly, this one.

Rita Skeeter gestures to the empty seat across from her, legs crossed in a business-like manner.

"Come now Harry, why don't you sit down."

I comply in the spirit of politeness. The action brings an approving look to the woman's eyes.

"Let us get this interview started, shall we?"

I do not reply at first. My attention is riveted to the feathered quill that moves with a life of its own over her shoulder.

"That," I say and incline my head to the implement in question, "is a Quick-Quotes Quill."

"Very observant, aren't you?" Skeeter regards me like a hawk, smiling a smile that is too sweet to be real, "You're bright for your age, Harry. I like that. Young people these days are so foolish when it comes to thinking. But you're different. You would have to be to survive for so long by yourself."

I ignore the empty platitudes and continue to focus on the quill.

"Quick-Quill Quotes are a sign of bad reporting, Ms. Skeeter. They tend to record words not spoken in the interview. Words that often can be misconstrued into something else completely."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," the reporter repeats my name as though I were an old friend, "There's one thing you must know about the news world. It's all about interest. Interest in the newspaper. Interest in the articles. Interest in us. People don't want to read about what's going on around them. They want to read what they imagine is going on around them. Adventures. Exploits. Murders. Scandals," her eyes narrow ever so slightly at the last word, "Compared to those, facts

are so boring, so flat. The truth is what people want to hear, Harry. Far be it from me to deny them that."

"A rather slanted way of telling the story, no?" I say neutrally, "To be do away with the facts and resort to what people want to hear."

Skeeter smiles at me, showing pearly white teeth that match perfectly with the string of pearls she wears around her neck.

"It's just good business. I'm sure you understand that."

"Even if I do, what makes you think I'll agree to continue this interview? Especially after you just admitted to embellishing your articles."

"Oh, it's very simple," Skeeter rummages through her purse and produces a new inkwell. She unseals the top and sets it aside, "You see Harry, I understand you. Despite what you might think, I know you and understand your motives. You're a bitter, hateful young man who has been wronged by the world, especially by your family. Others might think you need time and space to forgive. They couldn't be more wrong. What you want is pain. What you want is for them to feel pain. For your parents, your brother, and everyone else who ignored you to feel the same pain you did and still do," the Quick-Quotes Quill floats over and dips itself into the inkwell before settling over the sheaf of parchment perched on its master's lap, "After all, it's not fair, is it? For them to have lived and moved on while you had to exist in the shadows, by yourself, unloved and forgotten. Well, I can help you, Harry. Let me write this story about you. Tell me what happened after you left. All the horrors you've been forced to witness. All the deeds you've had to do to survive. We can make the public cry out in outrage!" the woman's eyes gleam with an unhealthy dose of zeal as she stares at me, complete with a predatory look on her face, "Make all of magical Britain wallow in guilt! Make the world realize the crimes they committed against Harry James Potter!" she sighs in ecstasy, and I am faintly disturbed by the lust that has replaced the zeal in her eyes, "History is in the making, Harry. And it's poised to be written by my pen. All I need is your side of the story."

As she finishes, I notice that her quill has already begun its frenzied writing. I move my head slightly so that I can catch the briefest of

glimpses of the parchment and the hastily scratched out words it contains.

As I stare into his soulful eyes, so filled with pain and misery, brimming with unshed tears, I cannot help but think what truly has brought Mr. Potter to the brink of despair...

"Soulful eyes?" I repeat, amused, "That is an interesting choice of words."

Rita smirks at me.

"It's just good business."

"Good business does not a truthful story make, Ms. Skeeter."

"But a truthful story isn't what you want, is it Harry?" the reporter returns. She leans in closer so that the next few sentences are whispered into my ear, "You can hurt them, Harry. Hurt them in more ways than you can ever imagine. Paint James as the abusive father. Make Lily out to be the uncaring mother. Picture Adam to be the brother that had it all but never once shared by all rights what should have been yours as well... All you have to do is tell me everything."

"You want me to slander them."

"Slander? Oh no, Harry. You're thinking of this the wrong way."

"The wrong way?" I state, "Then what is the right way?"

"Think of it as punishment," Skeeter's smile grows wider, "As rightful retribution. Well-deserved justice. The reckoning that has been delayed for so long... After all, it's not slander when they deserve it."

It is a tempting thought. Beyond tempting if I am being truthful to myself. Desirable almost.

For here is a chance to inflict some measure of vengeance upon them for what they have done to me. Here is an opportunity to see them suffer. Here is a chance for me to revel in their pain. The woman is right. A few exaggerations to my story, a few lies in place of the truth, and the public would scream in outrage. The friends

they have won back, abandoning them again in the face of these new atrocities. What recognition they have left as the family of the Boy-Who-Lived shot to pieces when these fresh crimes are revealed. Their reputation shredded into tatters as my tale is told again and again through the media until every wizarding family in Britain can recite it from memory.

It is a delectable thought, and a course of action that I would be foolish not to take. There is nothing for me to lose in choosing this path. I can only gain from this. It is what I have wanted for so long. To spite them. To make them feel my pain. To watch their whole world fall apart, like mine did so long ago. These thoughts circle in my head like vultures, but one of them alone reigns supreme.

I can hurt them now.

Hate would have taken this chance.

"Very well, Ms. Skeeter," my smile matches her own, "Let me tell you my story."

Rita Skeeter trudged numbly towards the double glass doors of the Daily Prophet's main office. Her eyes roamed to the Quick-Quotes Quill that still hovered over her shoulder. She stared at it in betrayal. It was a novel concept for such an insignificant object to have bested her. Rita had always thought it would be another reporter, a younger, more cunning version of herself to be her downfall. The fact that her own quill, magically enchanted to be loyal only to her, would be the reason for her ruin hadn't even crossed her mind.

How giants can be brought down by the littlest of things, she thought.

She shoved through the entrance, giving no thought to just how heavy the doors were.

A few of her co-workers, journalists and reporters alike, greeted her with waves and smiles over freshly brewed mugs of coffee. She ignored them all and made her way towards the Daily Prophet's editor-in-chief, Barnabas Cuffe.

The man in question waited for her behind a thick, oaken desk, surface meticulously clean, unlike the mess of sprawled parchments and used inkpots that consisted of her co-workers' stations. He was

thick in body, especially around the waist and neck. A lifetime spent lounging in the writer's chair had wasted what had once been a muscular and handsome figure. A bushy mustache sat above the lips, flecked with specks of gray. His hair was the same color, a dull, drab gray with an occasional white strand that stuck out. Small eyes, though not beady, stared back at her, warmth shining through the light blue irises. All in all, Barnabas Cuffe gave off the impression of an aged hound, venerable in years but dignified in spirit.

He smiled cheerily at her as she halted in front of him.

"Hello Rita. Gotten the article all done?"

For a moment, Rita couldn't find the right words she wanted to say. She settled for a "yes" after a brief silence.

"Ah, excellent, excellent," Barnabas rubbed his pudgy hands together, "The public will eat this story up. I just know it. To have the other Potter's tale on our front page, why, it would double our subscriptions at the very least," the editor sighed contentedly, "Just think of how much more galleons that would bring in. I can finally afford that mansion up by Rotherham. Maybe even install a pool, like the muggles do."

Rita wanted to say that she sincerely doubted this article would be nearly as successful as her employer suggested, but she didn't have the heart to do it when she saw just how excited Barnabas was. He wasn't a bad man, she reflected, just a bit greedy.

"You've put your own spin to it, I presume?" Barnabas asked, a glint of cunning materializing in his eyes, "Excellent, excellent. Not that I'm biased against good journalism, but sometimes it can get so boring at times. But you, Rita; you make things so much more interesting," the editor nodded his head towards the quill still hovering over her shoulder, "I can't believe I was against you using that when you first started. I was so prim and proper back then. So concerned that we got the facts right. But now, I'm glad I've seen things your way. People don't want the truth. They just want what they think is the truth. That Quick-Quotes Quill of yours has done wonders, I say. Marvelous thing it is."

Rita made a faint choking noise in the back of her throat.

"What was that dear?" the man blinked at her, "You sounded like you wanted to say something."

She muttered something under her breath.

"Are you quite alright, Rita?" Barnabas looked concerned, "Was the excitement of writing Mr. Potter's story too much for you? You seem rather out of it today."

Rita sighed.

"With all due respect sir, I don't think we should publish this article."

In the silence that followed, the reporter swore she could have heard a pin drop.

"You think we shouldn't publish this article," her employer said slowly, disbelievingly, "This... This is new, Rita. For you. You've always demanded the Prophet run every article you've authored... It's the story isn't it?" the uncertainty in Barnabas's face disappeared, replaced by excitement, "The tale was so tragic that you are having doubts of publishing it. My, my, I knew the Potters were negligent in raising that boy, but I never suspected they would go to such extremes... Forget your doubts, Rita. The public deserves to know, as you are so fond of saying," the man leaned back into his chair, and smiled approvingly at her, "I will look forward to reading your story in tomorrow's paper."

Rita rubbed her temples tiredly.

"No sir, that isn't it."

Barnabas regarded her in consternation.

"Then what is it?"

"I think sir, that it would be best if you saw for yourself."

She handed him a stack of parchment, her quill's tidy scrawl visible across the papers' surface. Barnabas stared at it as if it were something alien.

"You want me to edit your article?" the man looked utterly confused, "This is another first, Rita. You've always maintained that whatever you write has been impeccable to the highest degree."

"Sir, perhaps things would be clearer if you just looked over the article."

"Oh no, Rita, I can't do that," Barnabas held out his hands in front of him hastily. It looked like he was trying to ward the papers away, "You know I've stopped editing papers many years ago. You convinced me yourself that it wasn't needed, and I couldn't agree more," the editor-in-chief smiled sadly, "The age of old men like me has passed, and gone with it is the age of good, honest journalism. The times have changed, and the public's perception of what news is has changed as well. I'm afraid if I read your article, I'd be too unsettled to publish it."

Rita closed her eyes, remembering the first time she had written an article as a reporter for the Prophet. That had been nearly a decade ago, and she had nearly lost her job because of it. The Barnabas of back then had been a ruthless taskmaster as well as a champion of the truth. Her article had merely left out a few facts while adding others in. In response, Barnabas chewed her out for a full hour, citing the numerous times she had broken the laws of integrity that all journalists were beholden to in their work.

The difference between the old Barnabas and the new one was uncanny, and Rita knew that she was at least partially responsible for the change. For when the same article received a plethora of praise from the public and renewed much of the Prophet's stagnating subscriptions, Barnabas had been forced to admit that there was some merit in embellishing the story. She had been allowed leeway in her writing ever since.

"Sir, I'm still recommending we don't print this article for tomorrow's paper."

"And I'm recommending we do," her employer stared levelly back, "We need those subscriptions. And after the public reads about the lost Potter's story, we'll get them. There is no arguing about this, Rita. Your article will be on the front page tomorrow," almost as an afterthought, the man added, "Whatever it is, it can't be that bad."

Rita fought the urge to sigh again. Over the years, Barnabas's stringent adherence to what is right had been slowly eroded away as her articles brought in more and more readers. He still held on to a few personal traits however, stubbornness being chief among them.

"Very well sir," she said dejectedly, "But remember that I did warn you."

"No fear, Rita," Barnabas grinned merrily, "no fear. I'm sure that this article will be your most famous one yet."

Rita smiled back. It was the most painful smile she ever remembered smiling.

"If you think so, sir."

"I don't think so, I know so!" the older man declared, and finally took the sheaf of parchment from her hand, "Now I'll just hand this over to the prints and we can get all of this started! You enjoy the rest of your day off, Rita. You've earned it."

"Thank you sir."

"Yes, yes," her employer made a shooing gesture with his hand, "Now go out and have some fun before I change my mind."

Thoroughly dismissed, Rita swiveled on her feet jerkily and marched for the door. Some of her colleagues looked bemused at her strange choice of gait but she refused to meet their inquiring eyes. The heavy doors swung open again, and she found herself where she had been moments before, outside the Daily Prophet's main office. Throngs of shoppers were travelling back and forth along the cobblestone streets, visiting the numerous shops that were lined on Diagon Alley. Some floated packages behind them as they walked. Others sat lounging on restaurant chairs, their purchases stacked beside them. All in all, it was a rather soothing sight.

The reporter turned her gaze upwards, towards the sky.

"Well played, Harry," she said to no one in particular, "Well played."



The morning sun dawned bright and early on the Hogwarts roof. Its rays were filtered through the windows of the old castle, spreading light through the hallways with a lazy slowness.

It was in one such hallway that two boys strode, feet colliding against the cool stone as they made their way down from their dorms to breakfast. Usually their pace would be a leisurely amble, taking the time to bask in the warm beams of sunlight. Today, however, the two travelled at a much brisker speed, the chaos in their minds influencing the manner of their gait.

"I'm worried, Ron," Adam Potter said anxiously as he walked, "Harry could have done a lot of damage to my parents. I think they're barely getting by knowing that he hates them. I'm afraid what will happen when everyone reads that article and decides again they don't want anything to do with us. I don't think my parents can take it."

"You don't think he did that on purpose, did you?" his best friend replied earnestly, "He must have known Rita Skeeter is just a gossip. All her articles are more like tabloids than the news. My mum used to be a big fan of hers, and then she wrote something about my dad and his work. Nearly ended his career. We still receive the Prophet at our home, but my mum snips out all the articles by Skeeter. We don't know what she does with them but Fred and George reckon she burns them in the backyard when we're out of the house."

"I'm pretty sure he did agree to the interview on purpose," Adam responded gloomily.

"But why would he do that?" Ron argued, "Unless he intends to hurt you and your parents?"

When Adam didn't reply and merely looked down, Ron's eyes widened.

"But he can't do that! He must have not known what harm Skeeter could do with her articles!"

"I'd like to believe that. I really do. But the Harry I met was adamant that he hated us. He doesn't need a better reason than that to hurt us."

"Maybe he decided to go easy on your parents?" Ron suggested hopefully, "Instead of saying they neglected him, he might have just said they ignored him."

"That's hardly any better, Ron," Adam pointed out as they turned a corner, "And knowing Rita Skeeter, she'll trump up the smallest of things into something huge. When my brother first left she made us out to be monsters. I'm afraid what she can do when Harry's providing her with the ammunition."

"He wouldn't do that, would he?" Ron asked, "He's your brother. That has to count for something."

"Well," the Boy-Who-Lived grimaced as he recalled the last conversation he had with Harry, "he doesn't consider me to be his brother. He made that quite clear."

"Merlin," Ron breathed, "He really said that to you?"

Adam smiled bitterly.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

His best friend nodded vigorously.

"Yeah it is. I mean, Fred and George sometimes go overboard when they're pranking me, but I'd never... you know... disown them as brothers."

"Fred and George never treated you like I did to Harry. And even if they did, you still have Bill and Charlie. Even Percy. You'd at least have someone. Harry only had me, and I screwed it up."

Ron said nothing.

"You know what's funny?" Adam whispered, "You have five brothers and a sister. Six siblings in total. Sure, you're the youngest of the brothers, and you had the misfortune of being born before the only daughter in your family. Molly never fawned over you like she did to Ginny. But at least she treated you right. And that's the funny thing. You, who should by all means know what it's like to be overlooked, are trying to comfort someone like me, someone who's always

gotten what he wants, someone who ignored and mistreated someone like you."

"That's not funny," the redhead murmured.

"I know. That's why I'm not laughing."

The two boys walked in silence for a while, navigating through the corridors of Hogwarts to reach the Great Hall.

"Maybe it won't be that bad," as usual, it was Ron who broke the silence, "The fallout, I mean. You've been through it all before. It's not like it's all new to you."

"I just don't want to see my parent suffer," Adam said firmly, "Anything they do to me I'll just turn the other cheek."

"Yeah, that's the spirit!" Ron grinned, "I mean you have friends now. Real, honest friends. So what if the rest of the school hates your guts? You've got me and Hermione! And Ginny too! Maybe not all of the Gryffindor, but you can count on Fred and George! And the quidditch team too! They have to work with you, after all. And so what if all of magical Britain is disgusted with your parents? They've got loads of friends who'll stick with them. I mean they've got Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus, my parents, and..." the Gryffindor barked, "... and Sirius and Remus."

"You said Sirius and Remus twice."

"Sorry mate," Ron said sheepishly, "I couldn't think of any others."

"Ron," Adam swept a hand agitatedly through his hair, "You're not helping."

The redhead nodded studiously.

"Right. I'll just shut up now."

The two walked through the last hallway that separated them from the Great Hall. Both of them stopped dead in their tracks. The massive oaken doors were already open, and through the entranceway they could see all four of the house tables. At least half the student population held a copy of the Daily Prophet in their

hands and those that didn't were busy looking over their friends' shoulders. Adam had never heard the Great Hall so silent.

"Oh no," he breathed.

Ron gazed at him sympathetically.

"Well everything's out in the open now," his friend nudged him, "Let's get this over with."

The Boy-Who-Lived swallowed and began to make his way to the Gryffindor table. He anticipated stares, and he got them. But they weren't the hateful, disgusted looks he had expected. Instead, everyone looked... confused.

Their approach went nearly unnoticed by their housemates, with only Neville Longbottom budging from his seat to give them room. All the rest were too busy perusing through the Daily Prophet to care. Neville flashed a faltering grin at the two as they sat down.

"Wow, Adam. I thought I knew everything about Harry running away. But today's editorial definitely sheds a new light."

The Boy-Who-Lived mentally groaned. Neville went back to sharing his newspaper with Ginny, who to Adam's dismay seemed utterly fascinated by the article. Ron patted his shoulder compassionately before dumping a week's portion of food onto his plate.

Adam turned to Hermione who looked a bit red in the face as she finished reading her own newspaper.

"It doesn't say anything bad about my parents does it?" he asked hesitantly.

He expected Hermione to nod reluctantly while giving him a sympathetic look. Instead, she broke into a fit of uncontrolled giggling.

The Gryffindor stared dumbly at his friend.

"Hermione?"

The girl tried to stop giggling but only succeeded in laughing louder.

"Blimey, she's gone mad mate," Ron said through a mouthful of food.

Adam ignored him and tried again.

"Errr... Hermione?"

The Gryffindor bookworm shook her head fervently as she continued to laugh before pushing her copy of the Daily Prophet towards both boys. Adam debated if he should turn away or not, worried that plastered over the front page would be Harry's scowling picture and a scathing article about his parents. Curiosity won over fear, and the Boy-Who-Lived hesitantly looked down. And stared.

There, on the front page of the Prophet, was indeed Harry's picture in grainy black and white. But that was not what caught Adam's eye. Instead, he focused on the words above the picture. Inscribed in big bold italics and covering nearly half the page were but two sentences, constructed together to make a single title.

MY LIFE WITH THE CRUMPLE-HORNED-SNORKACKS

HARRY POTTER TELLS HIS TALE OF LOVE AND LOSS IN THE DEPTHS OF THE AMAZON RAINFOREST

Adam didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

Over at the Ravenclaw table, a blonde-haired girl put down the copy of the Daily Prophet she had been reading and folded it neatly. Then, she turned to the boy next to him and raised a single eyebrow.

"I'm disappointed, Lord Wrackspurt," said Luna Lovegood, "Crumple-Horned Snorkacks don't live in rainforest environments. It's too wet for them there."

The boy shrugged as he buttered up a piece of toast.

"I'm sorry, Luna. But you know how it is with newspapers," his smile resembled a certain bespectacled reporter's, "To them, it's just good business."

## Chapter 15: Dragons

The boy was an early riser. When most of the school was still in heavy slumber he kept a silent vigil near the Beauxbatons carriage. That suited Luna Lovegood just fine. She too rose early in morning, though her reason was much more personal. The Nargles had an annoying tendency to bother her when she made her way down to the Great Hall during her first year and she had learned to rise early to avoid them as a result. That habit had lasted until now.

Who knew that Wrackspurts with big fiery swords made such a fine sleeping remedy? Ever since Hate had emerged from her chest, the Nargles had kept a wide berth from her. This was a new experience for Luna, for now she could sleep until her classmates rose, something she had been avidly enjoying for the past few weeks.

But today was different. Today she followed the same routine she had persisted in for three years. She had slipped from her bed, even earlier the usual times, and sneaked through the deserted hallways and for the Hogwarts grounds, where the Beauxbatons carriage awaited. It was an important occasion, and one she would rather not be late to. For today, she rose not for herself or because of Nargles, but for the boy.

Luna leaned back against the carriage's wooden surface, humming a soft tune to herself. It was a chilly morning, and whenever she breathed out, a soft mist would form from her lips. This didn't bother her though. She had come dressed for the occasion and the cool air did nothing but prickle her skin under the sweater and dress she wore.

At exactly five in the morning, the carriage door moved, the elaborate knob turning before opening. A boy with unruly black hair and a lightning bolt shaped scar emerged, frowning slightly as the cold wind buffeted him. His twin eyes radiated caution.

"Hello Lord Wrackspurt," Luna said from her place beside the carriage.

The boy turned to regard her, not an ounce of surprise on his features.

"Hello Luna," Harry Potter said back.

Luna placed her hands on her hips in mock fury.

"Lady Wrackspurt," she reminded him.

"My apologies, Lady Wrackspurt" Harry replied with a smile. It was still a fake one, but Luna thought it looked rather nice on his features. This was one reason she liked the boy. He was always pleasant to her, always smiling. Others smiled at her too, but their smiles were always filled with sympathy, as though she was something that needed to be pitied.

"Much better," the Ravenclaw said primly.

The boy's eyes danced with amusement as well as curiosity.

"Was there something you needed from me, Lady Wrackspurt?" Harry asked.

"A lady does not need a reason to visit her lord," Luna responded smartly.

She certainly does when it's five in the morning. A familiar voice growled into her mind.

"Hello Mr. Wrackspurt," the Ravenclaw was proud she remembered her manners this time.

Greetings, Moon Child. I trust those fools are no longer troubling you?

"I haven't had a Nargle outbreak since the day you used your big fiery sword on them," Luna paused thoughtfully, "It's strange, but I think you drove away the other Nargles that were friends with that one Nargle too. It's all very unusual. If you drive one Nargle away, they typically come back with other Nargles. But none of them have come for me since."

Cowards. Hate snarled. All of them. What they cannot do alone they rely on numbers. You should have let me end them, my lord. At least one. Make them fear the shadows as is right.

"The death of a student would have brought unneeded attention upon us."

I would have hidden the body well.

The boy snorted before turning his gaze back on Luna.

"Why are you here so early in the morning, Lady Wrackspurt?" Harry looked down and blinked, "And why are you dressed like that?"

Luna followed his stare, to where the dress her mother had bought her was clad over her dainty frame.

"Is there something wrong with wearing my favorite dress?"

The boy rubbed his forehead tiredly.

"No, there isn't. But one usually wears the sweater over the dress. Not the opposite."

The Ravenclaw made a tut-tutting noise.

"Why would I want to do that?" she lectured, "I want people to see how pretty my dress is. They can't see it if it's hidden beneath my sweater."

Laughter, loud and uproarious, rang like steel in her ears.

Impeccable logic, my lord. Impeccable logic.

The boy's lips twitched slightly.

"I see. In that case, I think your dress is very beautiful my lady Wrackspurt."

"Thank you," Luna beamed and twirled around so he could see her in all the dress's glory, "though I think it will be a slight hindrance to where we are going."

"Where we are going?" Harry repeated inquisitively.

"Why yes," the girl nodded sagely, "Today, we're going to hunt for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks."



The boy raised an eyebrow.

"May I ask the reason why?"

"That article in the Daily Prophet was very erroneous about Snorkacks, Lord Wrackspurt. There were many things they got wrong, and since you were the one being interviewed, you must not know much about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. So we are going into the Forbidden Forest to search for them. You can learn from them up close. I think it will be fun."

"The Forbidden Forest," Harry said slowly, "contain many dangerous creatures. I do not think it will be wise to venture there."

"We are only going into the outskirts," Luna admonished, "Not into the center. I wouldn't take you there, Lord Wrackspurt. The Nargles in the depths of the forest are particularly fearsome."

The boy cocked his head to the side at her revelation.

"You've been into the forest before?"

"Sometimes. The Rotfang Conspiracy can happen anywhere. I haven't found any clues in Hogwarts, so I think the Rotfangs are planning their deeds in the Forbidden Forest. But they won't get the best of me," the Ravenclaw leaned in to whisper conspiratorially into Harry's ear, "I've been checking the outskirts of the woods every once in a while, you see. It's all very logical you know."

"Of course it is," the boy said bemusedly, "But even if there are Rotfangs and Snorkacks in the Forbidden Forest, I do not think I would go. In an hour's time Fleur will be up and that is when the two of us train together."

Luna told herself the faint stab of pain in her heart was from a Polka-Dotted Kneazle and not jealousy.

"That means you still have an hour left to spend with me."

"Luna..." Harry began.

"If you do not go with me," the Ravenclaw looked up into the boy's face, "then I will be most cross with you."

Emerald colored eyes regarded her for a while, searching, staring, and she was afraid that he would refuse. Then, they closed, followed by a sigh.

"Very well," Harry said, "I will go with you. After all," he smiled, "it is most unwise for a lord to deny his lady's request."

Luna perked up instantly. This was another reason she liked the boy. While others may make up excuses to avoid or even outright refuse her requests, the boy would always accede to them.

"The Quest for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack," she beamed, "I think that is what I will call our adventure. Of course, you'll need these."

She handed him something pink and fuzzy. The boy stared at it as though it was a vial of flobberworm puss.

"Those are perhaps the most obnoxious set of earmuffs I've ever seen."

"They're Snorkack detectors, Lord Wrackspurt," Luna said seriously, "If you treat them badly, they won't work for you."

"I... I actually have to wear them?"

The girl rolled her eyes. Boys. So silly at times.

"Of course you do. What else would you do with Snorkack detectors?"

Harry gingerly placed the earmuffs over his head. The bright pink headwear clashed most atrociously with his jet black hair. The fuzziness didn't help much either.

"Well, we could set them on fire, for one."

Luna gave him a perplexed look.

"Would setting fire to them make the detectors work better?"

"What?" the boy looked just as confused as she was.

"The Snorkack detectors, Lord Wrackspurt," the Ravenclaw said patiently, "Would they work better if we set them on fire?"

"No..."

Luna nodded solemnly.

"That's a shame. But perhaps we can try it in the future sometime? Lighting them on fire. For fun that is. I hear the muggles do that during Christmas. Though I don't understand why they do it to trees. It's much better if you place candles on them like we do. It's safer that way and the trees don't have to die. Those poor trees."

"Lighting the tree for muggles," Harry said slowly, "is when they place bundles of artificial lights around the branches."

Luna frowned.

"Well that's just devious of them. Making the tree think it's on fire. Why, it's almost as worse as really lighting them on fire."

The boy chuckled.

"What am I wondering is how we got from fuzzy pink earmuffs to lighting trees on fire.

Logic, my lord. Drawled Hate. Impeccable, flawless logic.

"I rather suppose it is," Harry remarked amusedly and then offered his arm to Luna, "Shall we, my lady?"

The Ravenclaw smiled brilliantly and curtsied before taking the proffered limb.

"If you don't like your Snorkack Detector, that's alright, Lord Wrackspurt. I have one that you can wear under your pants. We can change if you want. But boys don't like them though for some reason."

Her companion's face went pale.

Charlie Weasley scratched idly at his scalp as he watched the goblin poke and prod his way through the cages. The short, knobby creature bared its teeth as it leaned over the Horntail, and tapped the sleeping beast with its walking stick. By his side, Yvette, their squad's master warder, tensed and pursed her lips in disapproval.

"I guess what I still don't understand," Charlie said slowly to the man next to him, "is why all of this is necessary, James?"

The auror, who had been watching the proceedings with interest, glanced apologetically back at him.

"It's politics, Charlie. The ministry doesn't want a screw up," James grimaced, "especially after Miss Delacour was almost taken from us by a bunch of bounty hunters."

"That I can understand, but why use another warder? We have our own, and they're some of the world's very best. Yvette has undergone an apprenticeship in the Ukraine with a very old warding family, for example. And if she's not good enough, then there are dragonhandlers in other squads back in Romania I can contact. I promise you they'll be here in time for the tournament to check on the wards."

"I don't doubt that, but it's all Fudge's orders."

"Fudge," Charlie repeated distastefully.

James saw the man's expression and smiled.

"Yes, Fudge. The minister is very keen on the idea of having Britain as the country hosting the tournament. He's also very keen on showing off to the rest of the world why England is the premier wizarding nation. So he hires a supposedly master at warding, a goblin from Gringotts no less, with the taxpayer's money, and has it check the wards for the First Task. It's a win-win situation for him. He guarantees the champions' safety while at the same time making himself look good to the public."

"Every passing day I'm reminded of why leaving England was such a good idea," Charlie said mournfully.

"I thought it was Molly," the older man teased, "and her knack of being over-motherly to her sons."

The dragonhandler snorted.

"That too."

The two men turned when the goblin snarled and beckoned for them from its place by the Horntail's cage. Yvette muttered something disparagingly in Romanian and stomped in the creature's direction. James chuckled when the woman was out of earshot.

"She's a feisty one."

"Yeah," Charlie murmured, "she is."

The auror noticed the way his friend stared after the woman and waggled his eyebrows outrageously.

"So when is the eldest Weasley going to come home with a girl on his arm?"

Charlie sputtered.

"Should Molly expect an engagement letter?" James continued on ruthlessly, "Or perhaps even rings the next time she sees you?"

The dragonhandler gave his tormentor a wounded look.

"I would have expected something like this from Sirius, but not from you."

"Hey now," the older man said cheerfully, "I was a Maurader too. Sirius likes to think he was behind most of the pranks, but truth be told, he was only the brawn. Me and Remus were the brains."

Charlie grinned sheepishly.

"My dad told me when he was dating my mom the Marauders hounded the two of them constantly. He still smiles when he remembers the pranks you pulled on him."

"Arthur is a good man and a good friend. He and Molly make a good pair," the auror's tone turned teasing again, "I hope you and Yvette make an even better pair."

"Heh," Charlie grunted, "I doubt it."

"Trouble in paradise already?" James slapped his hand against his chest in an exaggerated motion, "Well have no fear. I was known as quite the charmer back in the day. Anything I can do to help?"

"Maybe," the dragonhandler looked forlornly back to where the goblin and Yvette were still arguing, "Yvette is a very strong woman. Very forward-thinking as well. I don't think she'll get along with my family. You've been at the Burrow, James. You know what it's like. My family, my mum especially, can be so old-fashioned at times."

"Reminds me of when Lily and I were dating," James smiled at the memory, "I was worried too. She was a muggleborn and I was a pureblood. Even though my family had nothing to do with those idiotic blood purity ideals, they were still pretty old-fashioned. The Potters attended all the pureblood galas up until the First Wizarding War, you know. We only stopped going when the parties turned into open support platforms for Voldemort."

Charlie winced at the name. James rolled his eyes dramatically.

"It's only a name, Charlie."

"Easy for you to say," the eldest Weasley muttered, "Your kids kicked You-Know-Who's ass."

At the mention of his children, the auror lost all sense of cheeriness. His smile turned brittle and false. His face grew pained. His very figure drooped. The man seemed to age before Charlie's eyes, and the dragonhandler swore he saw grey hairs where none had been there before.

"Yeah," James said quietly, "well, only one of them did. The other didn't and we punished him for that."

"Merlin, James," Charlie whispered, "I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"Don't be. I'm used to it. These things come up in conversation once in a while," the auror gave him an unsteady smile, "As long as it's directed to me and not Lily."

"If it's any consolation," the dragonhandler said hesitantly, "I read that article about your son. The one penned by Skeeter. I think he wanted to protect the all of you."

"It certainly seems that way, doesn't it?" James looked faintly proud, "He has Marauder blood in him, that's for sure. Sirius is going to get his framed. Spent a whole load of galleons getting the very first article printed. Says he'll hang it over the picture of his mom back at Grimmauld Place. Brightens up the whole room without her constant nagging."

Charlie grinned at the thought.

"But no," the auror continued, "I don't think he did it for us. He's a Potter and Potters are proud and stubborn. We've hurt him too much for him to forget."

"Have you told Lily about this?"

"Lily's hopeful. She always is. She's never lost hope, even when the rest of us have. But that's the problem. Now Harry's back and he hates us. What Lily is hoping is that the hate will eventually go away. It would kill her if she learns that it may never," the man sighed, "Sirius is hopeful too. He's going to talk to Harry today. I've let him on the grounds that if Harry still wants nothing to do with us to never say a thing about it to Lily."

"We're behind you," Charlie stated firmly, "every step of the way. My mum and dad will support you, and I know the rest of the Weasleys will too."

James flashed him a grateful smile.

"Thanks, Charlie. That means a lot to us."

The two stood in silence for a while, watching as the goblin and Yvette gestured heatedly to each other by the dragon's pen.

"So," Charlie began, "are you going to tell me your secret?"

James appeared momentarily confused.

"Secret? What secret?"

"The secret on how you got Lily to tolerate your parents."

"Oh that secret," the auror leaned back and nodded wisely, "It was rather simple, actually. Once I gave it to her, she got along swimmingly well with my mom and dad."

The dragonhandler tried hard not to look interested.

"And what was it?"

"Amortentia."

Charlie blinked. And blinked. And then blinked again.

"Pardon?"

"Amortentia. You know. A love potion," the auror saw the horrified expression on the younger man's face and grinned, "The few Imperiuses I put on her didn't hurt either."

It took a few seconds and an exaggerated wink from James for Charlie to realize it had been a joke.

"Very funny," the dragonhandler grunted, "I'll be sure to tell Lily that when I see her next time."

Now it was time for James to look horrified.

"You wouldn't," the auror looked hopefully at him, "would you?"

Charlie just smirked.

A growl from in front of them caused both men to look down. The goblin stared back stiffly, its large canines visible in a leering grimace. Behind it, Yvette crossed her arms and made a foul face at its back.



"If the two of you are quite done," the creature's voice sounded like the wheezing tone of an unturned accordion, scratchy and discordant.

"Of course, Steeljaw," James replied formally.

Steeljaw. An apt name for one of its kind, mused Charlie. The goblin had a prominent, heavyset chin with what appeared to be metal rings stitched along its jowls. Two of the same rings adorned its crooked nose, giving it a bullish, bovine appearance. Despite these unusual ornamentations, it was still dressed immaculately, complete with a pinstripe suit, freshly shined leather shoes, and a scarlet tie emblazoned with the seal of Gringotts.

"The wards here," Steeljaw remarked, "are for the most part, satisfactory," Charlie hid his smile when Yvette smirked in triumph, "There were a few mishaps, but the warders were human, so that is to be expected."

The dragonhandler didn't know whether to be proud or insulted. But then again, that was always how he felt when dealing with goblins.

"The wards placed on the dragons are adequate, but far from exemplary. The wryms will be sufficiently addled in their minds to prevent them from unleashing their full fury against the champions, but they will still be dangerous to a certain degree."

"Err... yeah... That's the idea," Charlie said uneasily, "We don't want the dragons to kill the champions so we added safety precautions."

"Yes," Steeljaw smiled. The way his teeth were bared made him look like he was sneering, "Mind Leadening wards that lowers the beasts' overall intelligence and dulls their senses. Frostbone wards that slows their movements and reflexes. Even a few Blood Thinning wards to distill the magic in their veins. What purpose do they serve? To make the fire they breathe less potent?"

Yvette tossed a loose strand of hair behind her head and nodded.

"An adult dragon can incinerate a man in a heartbeat with just one breath," the woman said sourly, "The fire they breathe is vun of the strongest known to vizarding kind. The champions, despite the

goblet having chosen them, are still human. They will not last long if we do not dampen the fire's potency."

"Are they that bad?" James's face had been slowly draining of all color ever since the wards had been mentioned, "The dragons I mean. I know they're dangerous but this seems... excessive."

Yvette frowned and turned to regard the man.

"Dragons are some of the most dangerous animals on earth. Their skin is equivalent to modern grade steel, and the bite force in their jaws can snap a muggle machine chariot in two. Even their claws are sharper than any blade we humans have produced so far. And that is ignoring the fire they breathe," the female dragonhandler shrugged, "Back when wizards and witches still fought each other in the old times, they were tamed as war beasts by powerful magic users. It is said that a single dragon was worth over a hundred wizards and ten times that number in muggle soldiers. Handling them is both an honor and a danger."

James leaned in closer to Charlie.

"You didn't mention any of this in your letters home," the older man whispered hotly.

"I may have... left some things out."

"Wait until Molly hears about this," the auror muttered.

Charlie's response was to nudge him hard in the ribs.

"You won't tell my family a thing and I won't tell Lily about your horrible joke."

"Deal," James grumbled.

"What are the two of you whispering about?" Yvette stared suspiciously at the two, "And why is he so worried about the dragons?" the woman stabbed her chin towards James, "It's not like he's going to compete in the tournament."

"He's not," Charlie said quickly, "But his son is."

Yvette appeared slightly mollified. Then her features hardened again.

"You're not going to tell your son about this, are you? The dragons are supposed to be kept secret until the day of the First Task."

James chuckled meekly.

"I'm an auror ma'am. Sworn to protect the wizarding folk of magical Britain. I'm neutral in this whole tournament thing," seeing the disbelieving stare he was being given, the man hastily amended, "Besides, I swore a magical oath I wouldn't tell any of the champions. Basic tournament rules."

Dry, rattling laughter sounded. The three turned to stare at the goblin, who leered back in return.

"Human oaths," it wheezed, "So easily given out. So easily broken."

"Right," Charlie tugged at his collar awkwardly. He never did like goblins, even though he was taught to be polite to them. Merlin knew how Bill got along with them as a Curse-Breaker, "Did you check the field as well?"

"I have," Steeljaw growled, "The wards there are adequate. The beasts will not be able to escape easily."

"They won't get a chance to," Yvette sniffed, "The dragons have been heavily dosed by Confundus Elixirs. We have made them believe they are guarding their nests, despite the eggs we have used are not theirs. Their first priority will be to defend their nests. They will only attack if the champions threaten the eggs. The conditions for the First Task were very specific. We have fulfilled them to the highest degree."

"That still remains to be seen. You will only know when the First Task is finished."

The female dragonhandler chose not to reply but the way her eyes smoldered as she stared at the goblin made her thoughts on the matter quite clear.

"Well if everything is all set and ready," James interjected himself back into the conversation, "why are we still out here in the forest when we can be back at Hogwarts near a cozy fire?"

"Finally, one of you humans have said something intelligent," Steeljaw muttered.

"Not us, I'm afraid," Charlie grinned, "It's tents for us dragonhandlers. Enchanted though, so we'll be just as comfy."

"I guess I'll just escort Steeljaw here back to Hogwarts then..." the auror turned to find the goblin already marching out of the clearing, "...or you can go by yourself."

James sighed and threw a wave in the younger man's direction before running after Steeljaw. Charlie watched them leave. His eyes lingered on the shorter of the two. There was a niggling doubt at the back of his mind that refused to go away. A misgiving that he mentioned to the woman beside him.

"Don't all goblins that work in Gringotts wear their emblems on their suits?"

Yvette shrugged.

"All the vuns I've seen do."

Charlie scratched his head.

"Steeljaw wore his on his tie."

His fellow dragonhandler smiled at him.

"You always overthink things, Charlie. I'm sure it is nothing."

"Yeah," Charlie muttered, still staring at the retreating goblin's back, "nothing."

"Crumple-Horned Snorkacks prefer to live in wooded areas," Luna said to the boy as they traversed through thickets of underbrush, "It keeps them safe from predators, especially their young, but that's to be expected of course. All manners of creatures are vulnerable when they're young, but I think Snorkacks are the most vulnerable."

Harry ducked an overhanging branch and scratched agitatedly at his pink earmuffs.

"A lack of defensive mechanisms, I presume?" he watched the surrounding woods warily, wand out, "They don't have whatever the adult Snorkacks have?"

"No, Lord Wrackspurt, that's not it at all," the Ravenclaw wagged a finger towards the boy, "Crumple-Horned Snorkacks all have very impressive defenses, even their young. They can turn invisible when they don't want to be seen. That's why my father and I haven't managed to find one yet. Every time we're close to discovering a Snorkack, it just turns invisible."

The boy gestured with his wand and a jet of flame shot past Luna. The girl blinked and turned to see the silent Incendio consuming a stretch of gnarled roots that she would have surely tripped over. She smiled.

"Thank you, Lord Wrackspurt."

Harry grunted in acknowledgment before giving her a puzzled look.

"If Crumple-Horned Snorkacks can turn invisible, how do we find one?"

"Oh that's very simple," Luna waved the question aside, "Crumple-Horned Snorkacks make very distinctive sound calls. They use it when they're trying to find mates or fending off predators. They're very loud and piercing. You would recognize them right away, if you could hear them."

"If I could hear them?" Harry repeated, confused.

"Why yes. The sounds they make are very high-pitched. They're too high for human ears to pick up. Like how there are sounds only a dog can hear. You would need to be a Crumple-Horned Snorkack to hear another Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

The boy didn't reply at first. His wand waved again, and a cluster of thorned branches directly in front of her fell to the forest floor, severed cleanly from the trees that grew them. Luna skipped past

without a second glance. Travelling with the boy made traversing through the woods so much easier, though that took some of the fun out of it. Still, the Ravenclaw preferred a slight pique in boredom than nasty scratches on her arms and legs.

"So we can't see or hear Snorkacks," Harry said as he kicked away an amputated branch, "Is there another way then, to find these creatures?"

"There's always smell," Luna replied cheerily.

"Smell... We're going to find a Crumple-Horned Snorkack by smelling it?"

"Oh no, Lord Wrackspurt, we can't do that," the girl bent to pick up a very smooth stone. It was shaped roughly like a disc, with a white, creamy complexion that reminded Luna of the milk cookies her mother used to bake. She pocketed it and then turned to her companion, "While it's true that Crumple-Horned Snorkacks have a very peculiar scent, it is still an odorless smell to us. A shame, really. I would have liked to know what a Snorkack smells like."

The boy looked faintly exasperated.

"That's three of the five senses out. You're not going to tell me that touching one won't work either?"

"Snorkacks possess a very complicated body. They have dry, scaly skin on some parts and lots of fur on others. The males have feathers on their necks to display them during mating season. You can definitely feel them."

The boy flashed a relieved smile.

"That's good I suppose."

"But we can't find them by touch."

His face fell again, though whether it was fake or not, Luna couldn't tell.

"And why can't we?" Harry asked as he levitated a few jagged pieces of rock from the Ravenclaw's path.

"It's one of their other defensive mechanisms. They can change how their body works. The composition of that is. It's some sort of complicated magic. When you do stumble into one, they'll just turn their skin to feel like something else. That happened to us, you know. My father and I cornered a Snorkack once and it changed its skin to feel like air. We tried for a long time to locate it by feeling different parts of the air, but they all felt the same. That was the closest we've ever gotten to finding one."

The boy seemed both amused and annoyed at this revelation.

"So I guess it's all down to taste then," he said.

"Yes, I suppose so," Luna agreed, "I think nature would agree. Lots of predators are interested in Crumple-Headed Snorkacks, after all. They must taste very yummy."

"Then do we run around trying to lick them or something?"

"Ew," Luna made a disgusted face at him, "Why would you want to lick a Snorkack?"

The boy blinked owlishly back at her.

"To... find one?"

"Not by licking it," she chided, "Crumple-Horned Snorkacks secrete a very foul tasting sap from their skin. It helps to preserve the moisture in their bodies. If you lick one, your tongue will swell up and you won't be able to taste anything for at least a month."

"It would have been a desperate measure," Harry admitted.

"Good," the Ravenclaw nodded, "you really shouldn't go around trying to lick Snorkacks, Lord Wrackspurt. Why, you'd look positively barmy."

Her companion snorted. The shadows that coiled and gathered behind him writhed in amusement. The boy opened his mouth to say something and then closed it when the ground shook with the clattering of hooves.

From the forest depths, something large but distinctively man-shaped emerged. It vaulted over a fallen tree trunk, swerved lightly to the side to avoid a nearby cluster of rocks, and then sprang into air in a graceful leap. It did all of this with a fluid, natural agility that no human could ever hope to match. The being's four legs thumped the ground in unison as it landed, kicking up a small cloud of soil.

By then, Harry had already pushed her aside and taken his place in front of her, wand pointing to the newcomer. Luna smiled. That was a rather touching thing for him to do.

"Centaur," the boy stated simply.

The creature shook its head, the motion making the wild, unkempt hair on its face move like grass swept by a light breeze.

"Venus foresaw that I would meet with someone with a capacity of stating the obvious," deep, intelligent eyes regarded the pair, serious, but not unkindly, "It seems that she was correct."

"Hello Firenze," said Luna dreamily.

The centaur raised a hand in greeting.

"Hail Luna."

"It's Lady Wrackspurt now."

Firenze shifted on his flank. The Ravenclaw saw a leather quiver filled with long, sturdy arrows strapped to the centaur's hip.

"I see," he said and smiled lightly, "Saturn has foreseen a favored friend of Firenze gifted with a new name. I am glad, Luna, that it is you."

"The two of you know each other?" Harry interrupted. The boy's wand had relaxed, though it was still pointed towards the centaur.

"Why yes, Lord Wrackspurt," Luna replied happily, "I met Firenze during my first year, when a particularly nasty bout of Nargles made me explore the forest. I was quite excited, naturally, and almost got lost. Luckily, I was saved by Firenze and two of his herd. Speaking



of which, is Rowan doing well? The last time I ventured here, he just had a foal with Nerin."

Firenze inclined his head slightly at the question.

"Rowan will be glad that you thought of him. The foal Nerin has birthed is a healthy young buck and with Neptune's blessing, will live a long and prosperous life."

"That's always good. I won't ask the same to Bane though. I don't like him. He has a particularly bad case of Wrackspurts. Drives him to be mean to everyone," the girl turned to her companion, "Not that all Wrackspurts are bad of course. Yours is very nice when he doesn't have his big flaming sword out, Lord Wrackspurt."

Both the boy and the centaur chuckled.

"That is Bane I suppose," Firenze said bemusedly.

"He really should meet Lord Wrackspurt's Wrackspurt. He's been helping me with the Nargles lately, and he's been very effective. Of course, you'll need Lord Wrackspurt's permission."

The centaur turned to Harry, solemn and stoic.

"You are Harry Potter, I presume?" at the boy's nod, he continued, "Venus and Mars have worked together to tell me this. It is strange, for the planets to align. The tales they spin are more often than not vastly different. And yet they foresaw this meeting between you and I. Curious, is it not?"

"Mars," Harry said slowly, "is war. Venus is love. War and love do not mix well together."

"Many of my kind would agree with you," Firenze said back, "And I do too, to a certain extent. But the path the planets deem us to follow is seldom wrong. War and love are direct opposites, yet they meld together within you. Perhaps you will need to know love to make war. Perhaps you will need to make war to know love. Or perhaps you just love to make war."

The boy smiled.

"So says the one with a bow in his hand and arrows on his back."

Luna blinked and directed her gaze towards Firenze's left hand, where the shadows had hidden it partially. Indeed, a stout longbow, strung taut with sinew was wrapped by the centaur's fingers. This caused some trepidation in the Ravenclaw.

"Is everything alright, Firenze?" a note of concern crept into her voice, "You usually don't patrol this far. You don't usually carry weapons either."

"Bane," the centaur's expression hardened a little, "has decided to relocate our colony deeper into the Forbidden Forest."

"Oh dear," Luna held up a hand to her mouth, "Has the Wrackspurts gotten to him at last?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid. He has moved our herd because he fears for our safety. Ever since the humans have claimed a clearing near our roaming grounds a few days ago, Bane has been consulting Pluto. A most unwise move, for Pluto's alignment is always the easiest path to take yet solves none of our problems."

"Humans? In the Forbidden Forest?" Harry asked, "What purpose would they have in coming here?"

"They were not the first," Firenze pawed at the ground with his front hooves, "There was another group, many weeks back that decided to utilize another clearing closer to Hogwarts. They made use of their wand magic to seal the area away from our sight. We have not heard from them since."

"I'm sure," the boy said encouragingly, "that they've already left."

"Maybe the first group, but not the second. If they were merely humans, Bane would have increased the number of our patrols, and nothing more. But instead, they brought with them fire wryms."

"Fire wryms?" Harry repeated, a glint in his eye where none had been there before.

"Yes," Firenze nodded gravely, "We've seen gouts of flame erupt from where they are caged. Truly fearsome beasts. Bane fears the

humans will loose them on our herd. That is why he has moved our colony."

"And where are these so called 'fire wryms' located?"

"Thirty minutes ride from here. Why do you wish to know?"

The boy smiled thinly.

"I want to see them for myself."

Firenze cocked his head to one side.

"You are either brave or foolish. Mars says you are the former. Venus disputes this and states you are the latter."

"Foolishness and bravery are two sides of the same coin. It just depends which side the coin lands on."

The centaur chuckled again.

"A very curious expression of you humans, yet one that can be applied to our kind as well. Very well. If you take a direct path from here, straight as a crow flies, then you will reach the beasts you seek. Be warned though, for the terrain will be treacherous as you near the forest center."

Firenze swiveled its body towards Luna.

"I am happy to see you have found a new friend, Lady Wrackspurt," he said seriously, "May the friendship last as long as the stars shine bright," Firenze smiled mysteriously and then moved closer so that his next few words were spoken only to her, "Venus aligns with the two of you most well."

The Ravenclaw's cheeks turned a slight shade of crimson.

"Thank you, Firenze," she murmured.

The centaur stomped the ground with its front hooves. A gesture of respect among its kind. And then he reared up on his hind legs and galloped off, disappearing into the gloom.

"I think we should put our quest on hold for now," Harry said as his eyes stared to where Firenze had vanished, "Until we've seen the fire wryms at least."

"But we came here to find a Crumple-Horned Snorkack," Luna pointed out, "Unless you're saying that fire wryms are more interesting than a Snorkack."

"Nothing of the sort, Lady Wrackspurt," the boy took a step deeper into the forest, "But my curiosity has been piqued by Firenze's descriptions. If he means what I think he means... then things have gotten a whole lot more interesting. Indulge me for now, and I promise you we can search for Snorkacks in the future."

"I'll hold you to that promise," the Ravenclaw stated firmly.

Harry's response was to begin moving.

In quick efficient strides he made his way towards the destination Firenze had set for them. Obstacles were cleared with brutal efficiency. Formations of rocks that barred their way were blasted into dust by a flicker from his wand. Where the trees were thickest, where their branches webbed out to create impenetrable barriers, the boy casted and created roaring infernos that burned the wood into cinders. Even the places usually not accessible to human locomotion; deep ravines, tall cliff sides, steep rifts in the ground, did not deter him. The earth itself heeded his call, shifted to become bridges of loam and ramps of clay that the boy and the girl tread on with impunity. The magic that hummed from his wand came at a record pace, never faltering, never hesitating. Luna had to run to keep up.

Once she had tripped on a patch of rough ground. Harry had extended his arm towards her without looking back and caught her by the wrist. The Ravenclaw was glad then that the shadows hid her face. She didn't want him to see how red it became.

Thirty minutes, Firenze had said, and that was from the perspective of a centaur, whose swiftness on the ground matched the finest of horses. It would have taken a regular man or woman at least two hours to cross the same distance. They travelled it in one tenth the time.

They reached the clearing with Luna trailing slight behind. She was used to hiking through the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest, but moving through its center, where the most difficult terrain lay, at near a full run, was a whole another matter entirely. The Ravenclaw panted slightly in exertion and looked up, to where Harry had crested a small hill hidden almost entirely by thickets of leaves. She joined him and stared down.

"Now that," the boy breathed, "is something you don't see every day."

Luna agreed.

Within the clearing, in four cages of heavy oak, goaded into a deep, magical sleep, were beasts of massive proportions. Each was at least thirty feet long, with the largest stretching to an easy forty. Clawed feet, ending in curved talons, were splayed out in unnatural resting patterns. Wings, pinions of hardened leather, drooped from broad shoulders and colossal backs. Every inch of their muscular bodies were covered by hardened scales, rigid and unbending like armored plate. Horns jutted from some of them, twisting spires of ivory bone that together, looked like frills. One was devoid of them entirely, forgoing the bony decorations for a sleek, serpentine body that was pigmented entirely in Slytherin green. Another, a thirty-five feet monster that was a clash of red and orange, snarled in its sleep with a golden snout that was tarred black from its own fiery breath. The third looked like a porcupine, with spikes the length of a grown man's arm covering a full three fourths of its body. The beast's crested muzzle rumbled as it snored. The last was perhaps the ugliest. Its face looked like a pit bull's, short and flat, with nostrils that hovered above its eyes.

Harry began laughing.

"Dragons," he said, then laughed again, "The First Task is going to be dragons."

"I was hoping for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks," Luna returned dreamily.

"I was too," the way the boy grinned caused the Ravenclaw to pause. He looked almost feral as he stared at the cages and the monsters they contained, "But instead we found dragons. Four to be exact. All

different species as well," Harry licked his lips, "Take heart, Lady Wrackspurt. We might not have found what we were trying to find, but overall it was not a bad day in terms of discoveries made."

He turned and then did something so unexpected that it made Luna blush.

The boy placed his hands on her shoulders and stared intently into her eyes. The smile he wore was now sincere instead of fake, real instead of false, and looked perfect for once on his face.

"Thank you, Luna," he said softly

The Ravenclaw hastily looked away.

"You shouldn't thank me," she murmured, "We didn't find any Crumple-Horned Snorkacks."

"No, we didn't. But it was never about finding Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, was it?"

Luna continued to avert her gaze.

"I don't know what you mean, Lord Wrackspurt," her voice faltered just a bit, "We came into the forest to find Snorkacks. Nothing more."

"We came into a forest to find a creature that could not be seen or heard, smelled or touched," Harry chuckled, "Kind of suspicious, don't you think?"

Luna stayed silent this time.

"It's alright, you know," the boy said gently, "to want to help people once in a while."

When the Ravenclaw continued to refuse to say anything, Harry moved fluidly beside her and slipped his arm through hers.

"It has only been an hour," he said quietly, "There's a good few left before classes start. Why don't we keep looking for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks until then?"

Luna stared at him in surprise.

"But you will have your training with Fleur soon."

The boy gave the direction of the Beauxbatons carriage a brief glance. He smiled again.

"I do not think Fleur will be very angry with me if I skipped out on this one session."

"Heya cub."

The boy stopped and turned towards the voice.

"Sirius," he stated.

The man in question grinned nervously and took a step forward.

"I was wondering squirt, if you had some time to talk before breakfast."

"If you make it quick. I am rather hungry. The hike within the Forbidden Forest has left me taxed."

The auror captain jerked his head in his godson's direction.

"You were in the Forbidden Forest! Merlin, Harry, what were you thinking! There's all sorts of dangerous beasts lurking in there!"

"And yet here I am, untouched and unhurt," the boy responded curtly, "Your concern is appreciated but unneeded."

Sirius flinched.

"Well... Could you at least tell me why you went in there in the first place?"

At this, the boy's lips quirked upwards into a faint smile.

"I was hunting for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks."

The auror let out an uneasy laugh.

"You're joking right? There's no such thing. I mean the article you tricked Skeeter into writing had them in it, but they're only imaginary creatures," Sirius moved closer, "That was a brilliant article by the way. It had me laughing for a good while. I've already purchased the first edition piece. Going to frame it when I get the time to visit Diagon Alley," the man's grin wavered briefly when Harry looked completely serious, "Errr... They don't exist, do they? The Snorkacks?"

"They do for some people," the boy said and started moving. Sirius had to rush his gait to a fast walk to catch up.

"I... I want to thank you, cub, for not giving Skeeter what she wanted. It saved your family from a lot of grief. Merlin knows how many dark families are out there, waiting for a chance to destroy them publicly. I know you did this for them. So thanks, Harry."

"No," the boy smiled, "Not for them. Never for them. It was for me."

Harry saw the look that passed on the auror's face and chuckled.

"Are you disappointed, Padfoot?" Sirius shivered slightly at the way the boy used his nickname, "To learn that my actions were not for them?"

"I am..." the man paused, "...but I'm also glad."

"Glad."

"Yeah, glad. It just shows that you have morals."

"Morals," Harry repeated distastefully. Sirius noted how the boy didn't try to deny it. That was a good sign, he supposed.

"Is there another reason why you are here, Sirius?" the gaze Harry directed towards him was not hateful. But that was the only description the auror could give. Not hateful, but not anything else either.

"I do have another reason," Sirius said slowly, "But before you refuse it outright, promise me at least you'll hear all of it."

"That would depend on the reason."



"Yes. Well," the Marauder began uncomfortably, "me and James were thinking we could teach you how to become an Animagus. I mean, if you want to, that is. I think you'll do really well, considering you know..." Sirius gestured into the air, looking flustered, "Well. You know. It'll be really useful, Harry. I can guarantee it. We've already started with Adam and we think his form might be a lion."

For the first time since he had revealed himself, Harry looked surprised. Sirius hoped it was because of the sincerity of the offer. His hopes were dashed when the boy next spoke.

"Adam's form is a lion," the sentence was uttered as though it was something vaguely nauseating, "Now that is a rich joke."

"It's no joke, Harry," the auror said firmly, "We've already finished the first stages of his training with him, the part when the potential Animagus learns about the animal he's to become. Adam's looks to be a lion."

"Are you sure that it isn't just some really big rat?" came the contemptuous reply.

If the question had been directed to someone else than Adam, Sirius would have laughed. Instead, the auror sighed heavily and wiped the back of his hand against his brow.

"You're not going to forgive them anytime soon, are you, Harry?"

"That word," intoned the boy, "does not exist in my dictionary in regards to them."

"I... I don't know what to say, cub. I mean, I understand why you're this way. Heck, I think if it were me, I would have turned out worse. I certainly wouldn't have the patience to pretend to be civil to them... On the other hand, they're my best friends. Adam is my godson just as you are. I hate seeing them like this. It's tearing them apart on the inside. I know from your point of view it's justifiable, but from mine, it's not as clear," the man heaved a heavy breath, "Merlin, it's hard sitting on the fence like this."

"Then choose."

"I can't," Sirius stared pleadingly at his godson, "I don't know who to support."

"Then I will make it easier for you. Choose them. For your sake and for theirs, stand with them."

The auror captain started in surprise.

"Why would you say that Harry?"

"The theory is elementary, Sirius. They need you. I don't."

The Heir of Black stopped in his tracks and gawked at the boy. Harry didn't and continued moving towards the Great Hall in brisk, steady strides. Sirius had to rush again to catch up.

"You don't mean that, do you Harry?"

The boy gave a mirthless chuckle.

"First James. Then Adam. Now you. All have asked me the same thing. Tell me, Sirius, why I would have said it if I did not mean it?"

The auror shook his head slowly, as though if trying to ward off the boy's words.

"You always wanted to see me and Moony when you were a kid. You were always so excited. So eager. I would have never expected to hear you say you don't need me."

Harry shrugged.

"Then we are even. I did not expect Adam's Animagus form to be a lion and you did not expect me to say I do not need you."

"Adam doesn't need to be the only Animagus we teach. You can be another. You don't even have to promise to attend all the lessons, just one. James and I can squeeze in some time in between our patrols. I promise you can learn a lot in that one session. If we're lucky, at the end of the day, we might even know what your form will be."

The boy did not respond immediately. He looked like he was honestly mulling it over, and that at least made the auror feel at ease.

"Your offer is gracious," Harry finally said, "but I must refuse."

Sirius looked down in disappointment.

"I understand, Harry. You don't want to be near James. It's still too soon for you."

"Is that what you think, Sirius?" the auror couldn't tell whether the boy's tone was amused or mocking, "That I am avoiding my father because I hate him? That I am hiding from my parents for what they did to me? Am I really that weak to you?"

"But-"

"You do not understand. You are still under the illusion that I am the same child as before, except blinded by my emotions. Your vision of me couldn't be further from the truth," Harry's face remained the same, but his eyes turned cold and ruthless, "If James could teach me a way of magic I did not know, then I would willingly stand in his presence to learn from him. I would do what he bades me to do, laugh at his jokes, converse with him as though everything was normal. I will be the son he always wanted. Supportive of Adam. Caring of Lily. And I would do all of these things with a smile on my face."

"I thought you hated them?" Sirius whispered.

"I do hate them," the boy returned, "But knowledge is power, Sirius. And if they had knowledge to offer me, then I would willingly swallow my revulsion to learn from them."

"But you would eventually leave."

"The charade ends," Harry said firmly, "when there is nothing left to teach."

"You are heartless," the auror murmured, "Did you know that? What you are suggesting is utterly heartless."

"I would be giving them what they want, Sirius. A measure of normalcy in their lives. The illusion that all is right in their world. A chance to live without their guilt. Even if it is for a brief time. How is that heartless?"

"But all of that would be fake!" Sirius argued heatedly, "It's not the real thing! And when you leave, you'll just send your family back into despair all over again!"

"What I offer is a temporary respite from the pain," the boy turned to look at him, "not an end. I believe that it is a decent exchange in return."

"You're so different Harry," the man said softly, "What happened to the noble, quiet boy I knew once? You sound almost like a... a Slytherin."

Harry smiled.

"I rather like the color green."

The auror blanched and recoiled. His godson continued to walk. Amusement tinged his voice when he spoke again.

"Still interested in giving me lessons, Sirius?"

The man gave a half-smile in response.

"Yeah, I am. Just not as enthusiastically as before."

"Then again, I must refuse."

Sirius stared at the boy in confusion.

"But you just said you would be willing to attend our Animagus sessions! You just told me you were willing to put aside your hatred to learn from us," he swallowed, "for a while, at least."

"That is if you had something to teach me. There is nothing left you can teach me."

Sirius was thrown by the confession. The moment his wits were gathered, the auror let out a gasp.

"You're..." he breathed, "You're already an Animagus?"

"Animagus implies I can only change into one animal. So you are wrong. I am not an Animagus."

"H-How many?" the man's voice cracked.

The boy was looking straight ahead, but Sirius caught the flicker of a genuine smile on his face.

"Only two."

"Only?" Sirius spluttered, "Merlin, Harry! Every Animagus in our history could only change into one animal! No one has ever had two forms!"

"Then I guess that makes me the only Animagi," Harry replied evenly.

"Two..." the auror muttered, slightly out of breath, "Two, for the love of Morgana, two," he looked up, excited, "Can you tell me what they are? Your forms?"

The boy's lips pressed together tightly. The silence that drew on was distinctively uncomfortable.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" the man sighed.

"No."

"Not even a hint?"

Harry gave him an amused look.

"They're both animals."

"That doesn't help."

"I know."

"If you're worried about me telling it to your father, I won't. I'll keep it a secret. Just between the two of us."

"I wouldn't tell you, Sirius, even if James was factored out of the equation."

"Damn," the auror muttered.

The two arrived at the Great Hall. The two massive oaken doors opened automatically for them, revealing empty tables and seats. Sirius wasn't surprised. It was still early in the morning, with much of the student population choosing to remain in their beds.

The boy stopped and turned. Sirius smiled weakly in response.

"So I guess that's it then, huh? Well, it was good talking to you, Harry," the man hesitated, "Could we... Could we talk again sometime?"

His godson regarded him for a long moment.

"I don't hate you, Sirius," he finally said.

The auror's smile grew.

"Thank you, Harry."

The boy gave him an inscrutable look and then started to enter the Great Hall. Sirius suddenly remembered something and called out.

"Wait!"

Emerald eyes fixated on him again in an unblinking stare. The man moved closer and peered around the hallway. When he was satisfied no one was near the vicinity, he turned back to the boy.

"Dragons, Harry," Sirius said in a whisper, "I nearly forgot to tell you. The First Task is going to be dragons."

One of Harry's brows quirked upwards in a disbelieving expression.

"Dragons," he repeated skeptically, "And how would you know this, Sirius? You are not one of the tournament judges."

"I don't," the auror responded, "But James does. Apparently the dragonhandlers have been here for weeks. James was tasked with escorting a wardmaster to them to check up on the beasts. That's how he knows. He had to swear a magical oath to keep what he learned a secret."

"Then how is he still alive? The oaths you speak of are stringent in their punishments should they be broken."

Sirius grinned mischievously.

"Well, he swore only not to tell you. The tournament rules states that non-affiliated parties brought in to help cannot inform any of the champions what the Tasks are. James can't tell you. But he certainly can tell a very loyal, charismatic, and ruggedly handsome friend."

For a second time, the boy looked surprised.

"It was James? James told you to tell me?"

The auror nodded fervently.

"Why would he do that?"

The question felt like a punch to the gut to Sirius.

"Merlin, Harry," the man breathed after he recovered, "You don't know? He just wants to help you."

Harry's face remained impassive, but his eyes flashed with something Sirius could not describe.

"If James thinks this will curry my favor," he said slowly, "then he is six years too late."

"That's not the reason, cub," Sirius sighed.

"Then pray tell, what reason would he have in helping me?"

"Damn it, Harry!" the auror exploded, "He's your father! He doesn't need a reason to help you! He's doing it because he loves you!"

"So now he loves me," the boy replied mockingly, "It took him only till now to figure it out."

Sirius let out a long, suffering breath.

"You're really not set on forgiving them anytime soon, are you?"

Harry glared back.

"I thought we were clear on that subject, Sirius."

"Yeah," the man looked away, "You made that clear enough."

Another stretch of uncomfortable silence. The boy, Sirius noted, looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the right words to say.

"It was James," he finally settled on, "James did this."

The auror captain shot his godson a puzzled stare.

"Yeah, it was."

"I see," Harry closed his eyes. When he opened them again the angry gleam was gone.

"Rex."

Sirius blinked.

"What?"

The boy's face was unreadable.

"One of my forms is called Rex."

The auror's mind worked feverishly to devour this piece of information.

"Rex... Like a dog? Really? I mean... that's great! Really, really great! My animagus form is a dog too! Of course you knew that already. Padfoot. Duh. That's awesome Harry! Wait until James hears about this! He'll be so proud of you, cub!" the man's face grew



concerned, "You didn't have any problems with the transformation did you? I had a few issues when I first started. Couldn't change my arse into a tail for the longest time. Remus and James still like to make fun of me for that. I can help you if you like! Not that you need it, of course. What sort of dog is your form, Harry? A German Sheppard? Saint Bernard? It's not a poodle is it? Well, I mean, it can be and that'll be fine too. Great, Harry. This is great!"

The boy weathered Sirius's outburst with quiet dignity. He smiled when his godfather finally stopped.

"I never did say it was a dog, Sirius," he said and then vanished through the entrance of the Great Hall.

Daphne Greengrass fought hard not to smirk when Harry Potter stepped into the potions dungeon. Like always, the classroom immediately fell silent, with those students near the entrance edging awkwardly away. One would think they were running away from something terrifying, or at least something intimidating. The boy, however, was neither. At least on the outside.

Harry smiled cheerily as he entered, and stooped down to pick up a potions textbook a girl had dropped in shock. He dusted the heavy tome off and deposited it neatly in its owner's hands before moving towards his usual seat.

The girl, Daphne noted, looked both awed and terrified.

Her reaction was mirrored by a significant portion of her classmates. Whether Gryffindor or Slytherin, they all watched the boy slide into his seat with trepidation, as though if the merest of noise would unleash a raging monster. Rumors, the Ice Queen thought with distaste.

It was not uniform, though, this reaction. Adam Potter, for example. The boy was staring painfully at Harry. He looked like he desperately wanted to talk to his brother, but was restrained by something Daphne knew not. The Slytherin narrowed her eyes slightly. There were rumors that the Potter family reunion was less than cheerful. These, the Ice Queen decided, at least warranted some belief. By Adam's side, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley hovered, completing the Golden Trio. The two regarded Harry with looks that were not friendly but could not be described as hostile

either. It was obvious that they didn't know what to think of their best friend's brother. Daphne laughed inwardly at the thought of Hermione Granger being nonplussed by anything. What she was interested in, however, lay on her side of the dungeon.

Draco Malfoy looked positively ill as he glared at Harry. The boy's face was contorted in hatred, but the way his eyes darted in their sockets gave everything away. He was afraid. Desperately so. A few desks back, Crabbe and Goyle were clutching at their limbs, despite the fact they had been fully healed by Madam Pomfrey. Both bullies squirmed in their seats, their eyes shooting to the vacant doorway and then to Harry, as though if judging whether to make their escape.

Their fear did make Daphne smile.

Beside her, Tracey noticed and nudged her.

"I hear from Lilith that Malfoy refuses to use the lavatories near the Great Hall. He always takes the long way and uses the bathroom by the dungeons. Whatever that boy did," Tracey jerked her head in Harry's direction, "must have scared Malfoy out of his wits. He won't even bother Adam anymore."

Daphne's smile disappeared, replaced by a slight frown. The rivalry between Draco and Adam Potter was legendary, with both constantly seeking to upstage the other. Whether in quidditch or in the hallways, the two would always fight, with Slytherin backing Malfoy and the rest of the houses supporting Adam. This support was not clearly defined, however. There were many in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw who were generally apathetic to the conflict between the two boys, and had supported Adam only because they refused to back Malfoy. It was a course of action Daphne found hard to dispute. After all, for all his bluster at being the Boy-Who-Lived, Adam Potter would never force a marriage contract on a girl out of petty jealousy.

The fact that Draco would keep away from his hated nemesis spoke volumes of just how much he feared Adam's brother.

"That," the Ice Queen said softly, "is further proof that I have chosen correctly."

"What can he do," came Blaise's voice from the desk behind her, "that we cannot?"

Daphne turned to look at her other friend.

"There is something special about him. I felt it when I was talking to him the other night. It was something... peculiar... something not quite right."

"Anyone that can make Draco Malfoy fear something besides his own father can certainly be described as special," retorted Tracey.

Blaise ignored the brunette and glared accusingly at Daphne.

"You didn't tell us this. About the 'not right' part."

"It was a passing feeling, Blaise. Nothing more. It's not like he has some demonic guardian tailing him every day or anything like that."

"Hmm," the dark-skinned boy looked skeptical, "I don't trust him. It's too damn fishy. A twin brother, lost for years, who suddenly arrives at Hogwarts? It reeks of suspicion."

Daphne smiled. Her mask translated the expression into a loathsome sneer.

"We're Slytherins. We don't trust anyone."

"All I'm saying," Blaise replied, annoyed, "is that we need to be careful. If he disagrees with our methods, then we might as well not have tried. Too much hinges on that boy. It will be easy for the plan to go awry."

"Still thinking of it as a plan, Blaise?"

The boy looked at her strangely.

"What else would I consider it?"

"Hope, maybe."

Both of her friends drew back as though if revolted.

"Hope is the first step towards disappointment," Tracey quoted some obscure author.

"Hope," agreed Blaise, "is for Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. Not Slytherins, like us."

"And yet hope is all I have," Daphne said softly, "Hope in him. Hope that he is Gryffindor enough to help me, and Slytherin enough to do so intelligently. Hope that he isn't just a normal boy with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove. Hope that he can prevent me from wearing a Malfoy ring by the end of the year."

"Hope," Blaise argued further, "is for fools."

Daphne smiled bitterly.

"I am willing to be a fool if it gets me out of this marriage contract."

Her friends didn't get to protest further. The dungeon door clanged open dramatically, and Snape swept in, black robes billowing out from behind him. The man carried a bundle of papers under his arm, and all the Gryffindors in the classroom reflexively cringed.

"I have graded your essays on the merits of Veritaserum," the potions master said as he stalked to his desk at the front of the room, "and as usual it is easy to see how some students excel at potions while others utterly fail at it."

The Slytherins smirked as one and looked triumphantly at their rival house from across the dungeon. Daphne smirked as well though it was mechanic and false. Her gaze remained riveted on her professor. The man's dark eyes flickered back for the barest of seconds before he commenced staring at his class again.

"However," Snape drawled, "it has come to my attention that one of the more intelligent students has begun to become lax in his studies. I'm sure you understand what I mean, Mister Potter."

Of the two boys who bore that name, only one jumped in his seat. The other merely smiled back.

"I'm not sure what you mean, professor," Harry said mildly, "But please feel free to enlighten me."

Snape's lips curled.

"It appears that your new celebrity status has dulled your mind," both Crabbe and Goyle sniggered stupidly while Malfoy wore a superior look. The Ice Queen sneered at the back of their heads. It was always this way, with Draco finding refuge in the potions classroom when he could not win elsewhere. He could always count on Snape to mock Adam when the Gryffindor bested him so he expected the same treatment for Harry, "How else would you explain this atrocious grade?"

The man held up a piece of parchment with a giant red Troll stamped on the top. At this, Draco let out a loud guffaw. The Slytherins that were solidly in his camp chortled as well, but Daphne didn't miss how they first looked warily at Harry before laughing. Fear, it seemed, was a far more potent motivator than even the fabled Malfoy fortune.

"Of course," Snape continued silkily, "this may have to do with the fact that you have been consorting with the Potters of late," the man adopted a compassionate expression, "Now I understand that they are your family, but be warned that being near their presence will have... detrimental effects on your intelligence."

Over by the Gryffindor side, Adam glared daggers at Snape. Only the threat of having points deducted from his house prevented the Boy-Who-Lived from speaking out loud.

"For further evidence, just look at your brother's choice of companions. Granger and Weasley. Not friends anyone would have chosen in their right minds."

Hermione took the insult in stride, as she always did. Ron, on the other hand, turned an ugly shade of red. It made him look rather like a blotched tomato, Daphne observed. Adam was forced to pull an arm around Ron's shoulders to keep him from leaping from his seat.

"You stupid-"

Hermione clamped her hand over the boy's mouth but it was too late. Snape turned slowly, looking utterly delighted.

"Insulting a professor, Weasley? I do believe that's ten points from Gryffindor and two days' worth of detention with Filch."

The muffled noises coming from Hermione's hand would have netted Ron far more than just detention had they been allowed to leave unmolested from his mouth.

"As you can see, Mister Potter," the potions professor said triumphantly, as if the three Gryffindors' behavior proved everything, "it would be a wise move on your part to distance yourself from such fools."

In return, the boy smiled and when he next spoke, his tone was perfectly neutral.

"I will take that into consideration."

Daphne pursed her lips tightly. She had expected some sort of emotion from him. Not anger or resentment, of course, but glee, exultance, perhaps even joy at his brother's treatment. If the rumors were to be believed, Harry hated Adam beyond words. He should have been elated by Snape's browbeating of the Boy-Who-Lived. Instead, he appeared completely uncaring.

Judging from the way Snape's brows quirked faintly, he was puzzled as well. The man's eyes flickered towards her again. The Ice Queen met them with her own, and tilted her head slightly in an almost invisible nod.

"Though your new champion status may have interfered with your classwork," the potions professor continued on smoothly, "the main fault of this atrocious grade still lies within yourself. I fear, Mister Potter, that I have misjudged you, and badly at that. I once thought you were a capable, intelligent individual," Snape sneered, "But now I see that you are just a slightly better version of your brother."

The way Malfoy looked triumphant, from his exultant smirk to the jeering gleam in his eyes, made Daphne sick to her stomach. But it was necessary. For victory to be gained, smaller, lesser sacrifices had to be made. Let Draco have his winnings for now. In comparison, it was a consolation prize to what Daphne would be taking home should she succeed.

"But rest assured, Mister Potter, I have not given up on you yet. I think residing on the more intelligent side of the room will do wonders for your knowledge in potions," Snape waved a hand towards the Slytherin part of the dungeon, "I believe a seat next to Miss Greengrass for the rest of the school year will suffice."

The boy smiled again.

"If you say so, professor."

Daphne narrowed her eyes. Again, her expectations had been ruined. She had predicted some protest from him, not an outburst, but at least some form of demanded explanation. Instead, he went along with everything Snape said. The Ice Queen's mask remained stoically in place. Inwardly, she grew worried. The plan was going much too smoothly.

Harry gathered his things and made his way towards them. The eyes of the entire dungeon followed him, some fearful, some surprised, most just confused.

The boy slid fluidly in place beside her, and deposited his school things in a tidy pile.

"Miss Davis. Miss Greengrass," he nodded towards the two girls as he sat down.

"Potter," Trace said neutrally.

"Harry," Daphne smiled.

If the boy noticed the disparity in tone in the two greetings, he certainly didn't show it. Instead, his gaze was focused to the front of the room, where Snape was already writing the necessary ingredients for today's potion. The Ice Queen frowned when she saw just how many flobberworms they were going to need. She hated using the disgusting things.

"I'll go get the ingredients," Tracey said and hurried from the table. Daphne watched her go and in return felt Harry's eyes staring at her. She turned to meet his stare.

"Harry?" she schooled her expression into one of innocent bewilderment.

"Nothing," he said and looked elsewhere.

Tracey came back with a tray laden with potion materials a moment later. She placed it gingerly on the desk. Four jars full of flobberworms greeted Daphne's disgusted sight.

"Well, here it is," Tracey looked down in distaste, "We're going to need one person devoted to cutting the worms if we want to complete the potion on time."

"Daphne and I," Harry spoke, "will cut the worms."

The tone he chose to use sent a chill up the Ice Queen's spine. Beside her, Tracey's eyes widened.

"Sure," she returned smoothly, "That will work. Tracey, want to do the rest?"

Her best friend nodded a little too quickly and Daphne winced.

The boy either did not notice or chose not to notice for he began chopping at his portion of the flobberworms with a small knife provided in the tray. The Ice Queen mirrored his action and began the revolting job of separating the worms into parts. The three worked in silence for a while, with the classroom around them becoming quieter and quieter as the students began to focus on their respective potions. An illusion of peace settled, and Daphne allowed herself to believe that perhaps the first stages of her plan had worked.

"It is a rather unusual occurrence," Harry suddenly remarked, "for Snape to move me to your table."

Daphne stiffened.

"A coincidence, maybe," she supplied with a smile, "Though if you think it is my fault, then you are mistaken."

"Strange," the boy matched her smile with one of his own, "for you to immediately think I was going to blame you."



The Ice Queen cursed silently. She willed herself to concentrate on the flobberworms. Her knife strokes became more forceful as she poured all her nervousness into the chore, chopping the dead animals into smaller and smaller pieces. It worked, if only a little, and when she next spoke she managed to keep her voice steady.

"Perhaps Fate just wants us to be friends."

Harry chuckled mirthlessly.

"I doubt that. Fate and I don't get along very well," the boy paused and stared at her board, where her hands were moving the knife in brutal, hacking motions. He smiled again, "This is an interesting game you are choosing to play with me, Miss Greengrass."

Daphne's next knife stroke missed the flobberworm by a full hand-span. The blade sliced a nasty gash into her left index finger. The Slytherin hissed in pain. Before she could stem the blood flow, Harry had already wrapped his fingers around her hand.

"But be warned that sometimes the game's players can get hurt should they choose their moves unwisely."

The boy squeezed firmly, and the Ice Queen felt a faint tingling sensation spread over the cut. When he released her, the wound was gone; the gash covered by pink, healthy skin once more.

Daphne swallowed hard.

"Thank you," she said shakily.

Harry patted her healed hand affectionately. Somehow, he managed to make the motion menacing.

"It's what friends are for."

Dragons. They were going to face dragons for the First Task.

Fleur Delacour clenched her hands into fists. The pain did nothing to drive the fear away, but she continued anyways.

"You are sure about this?" the quarter-Veela asked, her normally flawless face lined with worry, "Could there have been a mistake?"

"There is no mistake," the boy replied, "I saw them myself. A Hungarian Horntail. A Swedish Short-Snout. A Common Welsh Green. And a Chinese Fireball."

They were seated next to each other, in a stone courtyard that hung near one of Hogwarts higher towers. It was a balcony of sorts, with flowers magically grown into the stone itself. One of Professor Sprout's more inventive projects. The view the surrounding countryside presented was magnificent, with the Hogwarts Lake at the foreground and the Forbidden Forest in the back. It was a scene that most artists would have given their left hands to draw. The quarter-Veela ignored all of this, however. She had more pressing concerns on her mind.

"Dragons," she murmured and pulled her uniform tighter against her shoulders. Her bodyguard noticed and smiled thinly.

"You are afraid," he stated.

Fleur rolled her eyes.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" she growled, her tone a bit more forceful than she intended.

Harry shrugged.

"I'm used to fear."

The quarter-Veela glanced at him skeptically.

"Used to feeling it?"

"No. Used to others feeling it."

"Then you must be feeling it coming off me in waves," Fleur muttered.

"A little," the boy said back.

The quarter-Veela snorted and stood up.

"Champions aren't supposed to fear the tasks," she said after a while, "We're supposed to be shining examples of wizardkind. Heroes to our classmates. The best and the brightest. We were selected because we are brave and courageous. And that's the problem. I'm not feeling very brave or courageous right now."

"And is that such a bad thing?" her bodyguard stood up with her, "To feel not so brave?"

Fleur gave the boy an exasperated look.

"Of course it is! How can I possibly win the tournament if I'm already afraid of the First Task?"

Harry returned her stare neutrally.

"Others would be afraid too if they were in your place."

"They don't matter," the quarter-Veela responded curtly, "They're not the champion. I am. And I'm not supposed to fear."

"Who told you that?"

Fleur glared in her bodyguard's direction.

"You did."

The boy raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"I did? I do not recall."

"Not through words. Through actions."

Harry chuckled. For some reason, it grated on Fleur's nerves.

"This I have to hear."

"Every time I'm with you," she said quietly, "I strive to do better. Every morning we've trained, I've done my hardest to try and match you. Even before then, before the kidnapping, before everything, you always gave off an aura that made me want to try and compete with you. But I can't. I can't match you. I realized that during our first

training session together. You are stronger. Faster. So I settled on being as close as I possibly could. When I was selected by the goblet, I felt ready. When you told me that you believed in me, I felt like I was on top of the world. Like nothing could have stopped me. But now. After you told me what the First Task is going to be, all that confidence is gone. I'm going to face dragons, Harry. Dragons. I'm not sure how you feel, but I'm frightened. It's not apprehension or even nervousness. I'm just scared."

"That is normal," her bodyguard replied evenly, "Being scared is normal."

"But it's not normal for you!" Fleur snapped, "Never you! Always so calm! So collected! Nothing fazes you! Not even the threat of having to fight a dragon! And that's why I shouldn't fear! Because you don't!" she heaved a heavy breath, "You don't," she murmured again and turned to look at the boy, "You said to me that night I was rescued about how I didn't want to be like you. Well, I disagree. I still want to be like you. I need to be strong to win this tournament. I need to be able to face the tasks without fear," the quarter-Veela shook her head sadly, "And if I were you, I wouldn't be feeling this way."

"If you were me," Harry said with a half-smile, "I do not think I would be attracted to you," he tapped his forehead with his finger, "Take this scar for example. It just wouldn't fit on a face like yours."

Despite herself, Fleur let out a small giggle.

"There is some truth in that," she murmured.

The boy's smile grew. He walked slowly around her until they were face to face.

"Do you ever remember the stories, Miss Delacour?" he asked softly, "The ones you used to read as a child? Of knights and dragons? Of princesses and castles? Of things too good to be true but you wished could have happened anyways?"

The quarter-Veela nodded slowly.

"Those were fairytales, for idealistic children to fawn and laugh over. Where the heroes were invincible, beautiful, and sometimes too

brave to believe. Where seemingly impossible deeds were done without the main character ever lifting a single finger. Those were the stories you forgot after a while. The tales you reminisce every now and then but leave when better things await. We remember them fondly, for those tales were innocent, pure, and harkened back to an age when it was okay to be innocent and pure. Now think of the stories you've read when you grew up. The ones where the heroes were weak instead of strong. The ones where the characters you grew to love encountered great hardship or sometimes even lost the ones they loved. Those stories meant something, Fleur, because the characters in them were human. You remembered them because you could relate to them, could picture yourself with them, could even feel like them. The knight in the fairytale slays a dragon with a single blow from his sword. The knight in the real story is singed so badly his armor is melting around him. He is tired, exhausted, and his weapons have long dulled against the dragon's scales. But he still stands, defiant to the last, willing to give his life for the smallest chance of victory. There is a difference in these two stories, Fleur. The first knight belongs in a fairytale. The second knight is grounded in reality."

The boy turned away and looked towards where the Forbidden Forest lay, a mass of green that was a backdrop to the pool of deep blue that was the lake.

"Tales are made greater because the heroes in them felt fear and overcame it. Myths are made grander because the characters in them, when faced with obstacles that could not be overcome, felt desperation yet prevailed. Stories, good stories, are made better when the characters in them are terrified when the great foe approaches, but will still fight to the bitter finish. The knight in the fairytale will always remain a fairytale. The knight in reality will become a legend," Harry turned towards her again, "Which one do you think is a better read, Miss Delacour?"

The quarter-Veela gave a small smile in response.

"I am no knight, Harry," she said softly.

The boy shrugged.

"No, you are not," he said back, "But you are Fleur Delacour. Brave enough for the Goblet to have selected you. Smart enough to have

been chosen by your school's headmistress to represent Beauxbatons. And stubborn enough to try and get under my skin. I don't think the dragon has a chance."

The quarter-Veela looked up.

"But you don't fear," she pointed out, "You don't fear the dragon, or anything else for that matter."

"I abandoned fear for hate a long time ago, Miss Delacour," her bodyguard winked, "I don't think he has forgiven me since."

The quarter-Veela chuckled and then stopped. She turned away, ashamed. Harry regarded her with a curious look.

"You must think I'm weak," Fleur murmured, and stared at her feet, "For saying all this to you."

The boy merely stared at her.

"What I think," he said slowly, carefully, "is that both the Hogwarts champion and the Durmstrang champion would be feeling the same way you are right now if they knew."

The quarter-Veela smiled slightly.

"Was all that supposed to make me feel better? The knight and the dragon?"

Harry smiled back.

"It certainly wasn't supposed to make you feel worse."

Fleur let out another giggle.

"You have a way with words, Mr. Potter, that very few others possess," she teased.

"Many of my words," the boy replied, "comes from a good friend with not so good a temper."

The quarter-Veela felt a strange sensation in the air, a faint, prickly impression along her body. It was as though if the shadows clinging to the walls and creeping along the floor were amused.

She shrugged off the eerie feeling and then tensed when another sensation, equally as strange, but warm and inviting, surrounded her. She looked down, to where Harry's arm had wrapped around her shoulders in a comforting hold. The boy was now looking away, she noticed, and studying the ground intently.

"I think..." he paused, swallowed, and continued, "I think this is what I am supposed to do in a situation like this."

Fleur huffed, though it did nothing to hide her smile.

"You're right," she said and leaned back into the embrace.

## Chapter 16: The First Task

The morning of the First Task dawned bright and early on the Hogwarts ground. Students, fresh from breakfast, chattered excitedly to each other as they made their way slowly to the stands. Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws all mingled in one long stream of bodies, gesturing avidly to one another as they imagined what the first challenge of the tournament would be. The Slytherins came behind the other three houses, clustered together in one group. Their chatter was dulled and quiet in comparison, but the tense and eager looks on their faces spoke volumes of just how excited they were. Behind them, still further back, the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang contingents ambled slowly for the stands, the two groups slightly apart. The Durmstrang students walked in rigid files, faces set in serious frowns. The way they moved made them seem almost militaristic. In contrast, the Beauxbatons group strode leisurely across the Hogwarts grounds, resplendent in their light blue uniforms. The French students conversed in twos and threes, smiled as the morning sun's rays beamed down upon them from above.

The students were herded towards an open field near the lake by their professors. McGonagall led the front, prim and proper in her immaculate robes. Flitwick and Sprout were in the middle, talking animatedly to one another. Sprout carried a giant banner with an enormous badger etched across its surface. Every once in a while, the badger would growl at the surrounding students, which caused a few shrieks of surprise from the unwary. Snape brought up the rear, sneering as he stalked in the midst of his Slytherins. Sprinkled among their pupils were the rest of the Hogwarts instructors. Professor Vector, who taught Arithmancy, walking calmly amid a mob of gossiping fifth years. Behind her was Rubeus Hagrid, professor of the Care of Magical Creatures, who loomed above the trickle of students. The man seemed highly excited about something, and would keep gazing off towards the Forbidden Forest at regular intervals. Aurora Sinistra, professor of Astronomy, smiled gently as she steered a gaggle of wide-eyed first years towards their destination. Alastor Moody hobbled somewhere in the back, grimacing as his magical eye darted in seemingly random directions in its socket. The students, who for the most part were more than willing to mingle with their instructors, kept a wide berth from the grizzled ex-auror.



The stream of students began arriving at the stands. A sturdy thing of wood and enchanted wards, it could seat hundreds across its length and width. The first few students moved immediately to claim the topmost seats, where the elevation would grant them the best view. Steadily, the stands were filled, with the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws choosing again to mingle together. The Slytherins sat in one giant block, selecting the lower benches for themselves. The Durmstrang contingent took the row to their left, filing expertly among the empty pews. The Beauxbatons seated themselves up near the top, their blue uniforms a stark contrast to the dull robes of the students that surrounded them. The professors made way for a specialized box built into the middle of the stands. There, they would join the families of the champions and the tournament judges in viewing the First Task from relative comfort. Madam Maxime, Headmaster Karkaroff, and Dumbledore were already seated, waiting for them.

It took a few moments for the chatter to die down. When it did, the area above and in front of the stands began to shimmer and distort. An excited murmur spread into the air. A few seconds later, and an enormous screen materialized into existence, fully half the length and height of the stands. Its surface was like quicksilver, flowing with a metallic sheen that gleamed in the sun's light. The murmurs became a dull drone of excitement. The screen blurred and then refocused, tendrils of magic rippling across its exterior. Stabilizing currents. Garlands of arcane energy that gradually steadied the screen's massive size.

There was a faint fizzling sound, and the screen's previous blank face lit up with the image of a smiling Ludo Bagman.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the former quidditch player's magically amplified voice blared out, "Welcome to the morning of the First Task!"

In response, a loud cheer rose from the stands. Ludo's image grinned, and the real Bagman, his wand pointed to his throat, waved from the Judge's Box.

"As you've all noticed, we have decided to implement a new feature into the tournament! The screen you see here before you should be quite similar to those who went to the Quidditch World Cup earlier this year!"

Another loud cheer. Bagman beamed. His image on the screen did the same.

"You'll be able to see every detail up close! Every movement from the champions, every spell they should choose to use, you'll see it all! It is a momentous occasion for the tournament and a testament to our own magical technology! Who said the muggles were more innovative than us!"

The comment drew chuckles from the crowd except for the Slytherin block, where some of the students booed and jeered. Bagman blinked, clearly not expecting this form of reaction from his audience.

"Errr... right," on the screen, the man's gaze lingered over the Slytherins before focusing back on the rest of the stands, "Of course, having this thing installed did cost the tournament some extra funds. So, to account for the extra expenditure, something that many of you have also seen at the World Cup will be implemented here," Bagman spread his arms wide in an extravagant gesture, "You guessed it! Advertisements!"

Immediately, Bagman's face on the screen disappeared, replaced with a picture of a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

The wave of groans that emitted from the crowd was deafening.

Further away, a good distance from the stands, a tent stood by its lonesome. It was colored a dull, drab brown, with frayed, worn sides. To an outsider, it would appear that the pavilion was a station for security personnel or tournament workers. That was good. Those who had set up the tent intended for their work to go unnoticed. The lack of scrutiny meant privacy for the souls inside. They would need it, to rest and contemplate how to complete the First Task. For now, however, the confines of the tent housed more than the contenders for the Tournament Cup. Families of the champions had gathered, far from prying eyes, to wish their children luck in the upcoming event. The Diggorys stood proudly next to their son, talking in lowered tones. Amos looked especially pleased and guffawed loudly at something Cedric said. At the opposite corner of the tent, Viktor Krum sat on a wooden stool, surrounded by a ring of Bulgarian officials. The Durmstrang champion seemed a bit peeved as he answered the robed men's questions and grunted when they

pressed for details. The Bulgarians didn't seem frustrated at this though. On the contrary, they smiled at one another, as though if they had expected this sort of behavior from their national hero.

A pair of cerulean eyes peeked into the tent. They darted shyly to and fro, wandering between the Bulgarian officials and Cedric's parents in childish fascination. The tent flap was lifted entirely away, revealing a diminutive girl with golden colored hair. She stood there for a moment, timid and uncertain, peering at the people that talked and gestured within the pavilion. Her gaze travelled and then focused on a certain boy. All pretenses of coyness were lost in an instant. The girl gave a delighted squeal and shot into the tent like a miniature cannonball.

Her target managed a surprised oomph as she dove into him, and his arms instinctively wrapped around her body in a warm hold.

"Hello Bayard," she beamed a bright happy smile up into the handsome face, "I have missed you!"

The boy grunted and had to take a step back as she hugged his waist. He steadied himself and offered a charming smile in return.

"Hello Gabrielle."

The girl giggled and then stopped, her eyes travelling up to the boy's forehead. She frowned.

"What has happened to your hair, Bayard?" she asked in French, "It is dark now, when it was blonde before. Why did you change it? I liked it when we had the same color hair."

"Gabrielle," Fleur scolded by the boy's side.

The little Veela stuck out her tongue at her older sister.

"I'm not asking you, Fleur. I'm asking Bayard!"

"Gabrielle!"

"It is fine, Fleur," the boy smiled again. He winked down at the adoring face, "A little trouble with my original plans. I had to change my disguise."

"Not a disguise, I would think," a voice came from outside the tent, "It is easy to disguise yourself as someone inconspicuous. But as the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived? That defies belief."

A woman glided through the entrance. Immediately, all conversation in the tent halted. To say that she was beautiful would be a grave misuse of the word. She was not. She was gorgeous. A heart shaped face framed by silver and gold hair. Large, oval-shaped eyes that were a mesmerizing blue. A slight dimple on her chin that managed somehow to enhance her exquisiteness, instead of detracting from it. And that was not all. She moved in a way that was purposeful yet strangely delicate, with an almost ethereal elegance that seemed almost alien. There was a certain gracefulness about her that was not completely human, not completely right.

The majority of the men within vicinity stared at the new arrival in awe. Some did not and merely rolled their eyes. One of the Bulgarian officials snorted and slapped his underling hard across the back when the younger man came close to drooling. Conversation began to flow again, but not without some difficulty. Selene Diggory seemed slightly peeved at her husband, who was coughing into his hand and saying something to his son. Cedric, for his part, looked highly amused.

Fleur smiled warmly when the woman halted in front of them.

"Maman."

Apolline Delacour smiled back.

"How are you Fleur?"

The quarter-Veela tossed a loose strand of hair back.

"I am passable, maman. I do not like the English food here, but everything else is decent."

"Yes," the woman's captivating eyes shone with amusement, "Your letters to us have pointed that out to us quite well. Though a significant portion of those letters were not about food or England at all."

She winked. Fleur's face turned beat-red in an instant.

"Maman!" she cried out, scandalized.

Apolline let out a rich chuckle. Her slim body turned to the boy. Harry tilted his head in a slight bow.

"Ma'am."

The woman nodded in acknowledgement and cocked her head to one side. It was a casual motion, but somehow, Apolline made it seem breathtakingly beautiful.

"So which one is it? Bayard or Harry?"

"I suppose there is no use now in hiding behind a false identity," the boy shrugged, "It is Harry."

The woman made to say something when Gabrielle burst back into the conversation.

"So it is true then?" the little Veela gushed, "You are Adam Potter's brother? Sibling to the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry nodded slowly.

"I am."

The girl's expression turned worshipful.

"What is it like?" Gabrielle asked, her eyes alight with innocence, "To be the brother to a hero?"

"Gabrielle!" Fleur snapped. The quarter-Veela looked worriedly at her bodyguard who just smiled in response.

"I would not know. My brother is no hero."

Gabrielle blinked in confusion.

"But Adam is the Boy-Who-Lived! That means he is a hero, right? He defeated-"

"That is enough, Gabrielle," Apolline cut in sternly. The little girl pouted but didn't say anything more. Instead, she dug her face into Harry's robes and squeezed his waist tighter. The action drew a frown from Fleur and a smile from Apolline. The woman turned to the boy, "I am sorry, Harry. Gabrielle is still too young to understand matters that are more delicate in nature," this caused Gabrielle to utter a muffled protest while still buried in Harry's robes, "Forgive us."

"It is understandable," the boy said and pushed Gabrielle gently away into her mother's waiting arms.

"You are here, maman," Fleur spoke up, "But where is papa?"

"Sebastian is loaded with work right now," Apolline replied, her hands placed over Gabrielle's shoulders, "There have been many meetings with the parliament that he cannot reschedule. He will be here for the Second and Third Tasks, but the first one he will be forced to skip. He sends his love, with deep regrets that he cannot make it."

The quarter-Veela looked slightly upset, but accepted the decision gracefully.

"Now, Gabrielle," the woman smiled down at her youngest daughter, "I am sure you have missed Fleur just as much as Harry. Perhaps the two of you would like to catch up?"

The little girl nodded eagerly and skipped towards her sibling. She clutched her sister's robes tightly and immediately began to fire off a stream of questions. As Fleur answered them to the best of her ability, Apolline took the time to steer the boy aside.

"Sebastian and I received a letter from Fleur months ago, detailing what happened with the bounty hunters," the woman leaned in close to whisper, "Thank you for what you have done for us. We can rest easy at night knowing that our daughter is in safe hands."

"I am only doing what the contract bades me to do," was Harry's simple reply.

"Yes. I know," Apolline smiled gratefully, "But we thank you nonetheless."

The boy inclined his head slightly.

"There is something else," the woman began hesitantly, "You have foiled the first kidnap attempt, but Sebastian and I, especially Sebastian in this regard, wish to know if there will be more."

Harry chuckled.

"That would hinge on the circumstances, ma'am. Location. Time. Profit. All of these are factors, but perhaps the most important is who is behind the operation."

Apolline's lips curled into an angry frown.

"Augustin Montague."

The boy smiled.

"So sure already, are we?"

The woman nodded.

"We do not have any proof or evidence that he is involved, but he has been my husband's most outspoken critic ever since Sebastian's election. He is a pureblood supremacist of the highest order, and many of the laws he wishes to enact on our government limits the freedoms of half-bloods and muggleborns. Many times the more sane members of our parliament have tried to remove him from power, but every attempt so far has failed."

Harry raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"And why is that? He sounds like a most unpleasant fellow."

Apolline snorted.

"Money."

The boy smiled again.

"The bane of all good men."

"Indeed. It is no coincidence that the richest families in our society are pureblooded ones," the woman shrugged, "They are the ones with long histories that date back many hundreds of years. Their ancestors were powerful figures with rich treasuries, and that wealth was passed down for generations, with more being added by each. Montague's vaults, for example, have sufficient galleons in it to run any wizarding nation in the world for six full months. Of course, this means that much of France's magical economy is dependent on him. Lesser purebloods, the ones who can only trace their ancestry a few centuries, need Montague and his circle's approval to start companies. Half-bloods and muggleborns, the ones that suffer the most from his arrogance, are afraid of speaking out because doing so would mean the purebloods would boycott their businesses. And you know what will happen if the richest faction in the country decides that your business is not worth dealing with."

"Bankruptcy," the boy replied abruptly, "Followed by foreclosure of all properties. And if things get sufficiently worse, a chance that the goblins will seize your vault."

"Yes," Apolline agreed, "It is a vicious cycle, and a failed system. As long as they have that accumulated wealth, purebloods will always have more power over half-bloods and muggleborns. This occurrence is not limited to France or Britain alone. You will find that in the majority of wizarding governments, a small group of purebloods will hold a vast amount of power over the rest. They cannot outright express their views in public for the populace will be suitably outraged, but they can stall any laws passed in the parliaments to give half-bloods and muggleborns more influence in our society. France and the rest of Europe were lucky in this regard when Grindelwald led his armies in a rampage over our lands. Many ancient pureblooded families were killed off when they opposed the Dark Army, and the gaps they left in our government were filled with more liberal-minded members. In a way, we were able to reform. Now, you will find very few purebloods in our society that still hold on to their supremacist views. Something that did not happen to England, sadly."

"Dumbledore was able to stop Grindelwald before he could sufficiently devastate Britain's magical community," Harry said slowly, "The old families were left intact. And their prejudices were left intact as well."



"Exactly. And that is why Sebastian and I are worried. In France, Montague has little public support. His money prevents him from being ousted from our government, but at the same time, his position on muggleborns and half-bloods prevents him from ever holding real power. However, here, in England, there is a much higher proportion of families who still believe in the old ways, enough to retain significant political power in the government. Whatever Montague wishes to do, he will find much more support in England than in France. Which is why we wish to know if you think he will attempt something else."

The boy traced an idle finger across his wand in thought.

"That would depend. Is Montague one to easily give up?"

"No," Apolline shook her head regally, "His arrogance is legendary, even among France's pureblooded circle. He is too proud to ever give up on something."

Harry smiled.

"Then I'm afraid, ma'am, you already know the answer to your question."

Apolline sighed unhappily.

"We have tried to raise the problem with the British Ministry. Sebastian even attempted to reach Cornelius Fudge in private to discuss his concerns. But Fudge denies anything could go wrong."

"So you are back to square one."

"No. Not quite," the woman's eyes gleamed. She turned to see if anyone was eavesdropping on their conversation and then turned back when none were, "Augustin Montague is a cancer on all of France, including my family. We can do nothing to him politically, but what if we could hire someone that could privately? Someone who could cut away this tumor at its source? Someone who could end this pestilence behind closed doors? Someone like you?"

Slowly, deliberately, Harry slid his wand back into his robes.

"I am surprised," his features were still pleasant, still handsome, but they had developed into something that could only be described as predatory, "that such a request comes from you and not your husband."

"Sebastian is an upright, virtuous man," Apolline said proudly, "He believes in fair play and would never resort to underhand tactics. But he is sometimes too upright. Too virtuous. He thinks that any problem can be solved at the negotiating table, when history and current events have proven otherwise. Montague is someone whose deep-seated hatreds will never allow him to conform to reality. His beliefs are antiquated and threaten to destroy the society we have worked so hard to reform. Men like him would treat people like me and my daughters as slaves because they do not think we are human. Muggleborns and half-bloods are only slightly better in their opinion. Not slaves, but still servants," the woman's face twisted in disgust, "I would not shed a tear if he was to disappear overnight."

"I share those sentiments," the boy replied mildly.

"Then you agree to my request?" Apolline asked hopefully.

"No. I believe I will decline the contract."

The woman regarded him skeptically, as though if not sure she had heard right.

"You... refuse?"

"I do."

"If it is the problem of money, then rest assured I have my own personal vaults to withdraw from."

"Money is never an issue with me," the boy said simply, "It is the issue of principle."

"Principle," Apolline repeated, confused.

"Yes. Principle. There are three of them that the target must match before I accept a contract of termination. Criteria, if you will. From what you have just told me, Montague fits in with two out of the three. Whether he meets the third still remains to be seen."

"And what exactly is that third criterion?"

"That is a matter I cannot divulge to you ma'am. But know this... Should he fulfill that third criterion, I will accept your contract even if the reward you offer me is but a single knut."

The woman stepped back warily. The tone the boy used to say that last sentence did not quite match the pleasant expression on his face. She regarded him for a while and then shook her head slowly.

"You are strange for a bounty hunter."

Harry bowed his head, as though if the words were a compliment.

"I am sure you will find many in my profession who will say the same thing about me."

"I have no doubts about that. Still, it is strange," the woman tapped her finger against her chin thoughtfully, "Somehow, after you have told me about your principles; I feel more at ease, comforted, almost, that you are guarding Fleur."

From the corner of her eyes, Apolline caught her eldest daughter looking uneasily back at them while Gabrielle continued to chatter beside her. The woman smiled and leaned in close to the boy.

"Take good care of her for me, will you?" she whispered.

Harry's features remained the same as before, warm and pleasant, but his posture stiffened ever so slightly.

"Of course," he replied.

Apolline smiled again. Her eyes flickered towards the tent's entrance where three new arrivals had just made their way in gingerly. The woman beckoned for her youngest daughter. Gabrielle obediently detached herself from Fleur and slipped her hand into Apolline's. The little girl's eyes widened when they caught sight of the shorter of the three figures.

"Maman, is that-"

"Yes, Gabrielle. He is. Now come."

The girl nodded and kept pace with her mother. Her gaze however, was still focused on the new boy. Apolline nodded to the three as she passed them, then exited the tent with an excited Gabrielle in tow.

"That was the Boy-Who-Lived, maman!" even with the pavillon's thick sides muffling a significant amount of sound, everyone inside could still hear the little Veela's thrilled outburst.

The trio turned when Apolline left and began moving slowly, almost delicately towards Harry. Beside her bodyguard, Fleur's lips pursed into a thin line of disapproval. In contrast, the boy's face was neutral, blank, still almost pleasant, all except his smile, which had manifested itself into a cold smirk.

"Come to watch me fail, have you?"

The tallest of the trio balked, and took a step backwards in surprise.

"Merlin no, Harry! Why would you think that?"

The boy merely stared back. James's face scrunched up painfully.

"Right. Never mind."

"We haven't come to watch you fail, Harry," Lily murmured from behind her husband, "We've come to cheer for you."

Harry blinked and turned his gaze towards the small, bright pennants that were clutched tightly in Lily's hands to the colorful banner that James had draped over his shoulders and then finally to the enormous flag that read "Go Harry!" in giant, unmistakable letters that Adam held proudly aloft in his arms.

Adam grinned when Harry's gaze fell upon him.

"It's great isn't it?" the Boy-Who-Lived nudged his head towards the flag, "Me and mum worked all night enchanting it with charms. The thing will flutter even if there isn't a breeze!"

Harry ignored him and turned back to James, who was smiling slightly.

"You came... to cheer for me," the way the boy said the words made it seem like he was encountering something utterly alien.

"Yes we did, Harry," James said softly.

A flicker of something unreadable passed through the boy's face. It was gone before anyone could discern what it was.

Harry looked away briefly. His wand hand twitched ever so slightly. When he turned back, his features wore the same cold smirk as before. To those who looked carefully, it seemed a tad forced.

"I don't need you to cheer for me."

All three Potters wavered. None backed down, however.

"We know, Harry," it was James that spoke first, "But we're going to do it anyways."

The man hesitated, then placed a hand over the boy's shoulders, an action that Harry did nothing to prevent.

"Good luck out there, son," James said quietly and stepped back.

His place was taken by Lily who seemed to have difficulty trying to express her feelings into words. The woman's hands drifted up from her sides, stopped when they were barely inches away from the boy's face, then dropped down again. The Muggle Studies professor met Harry's blank stare and looked away demurely.

"Try your best out there," she whispered.

Adam stepped forward when Lily returned to James's side. The Boy-Who-Lived punched his brother lightly in the shoulder.

"Kick butt, Harry," he grinned.

Through all of this, the boy had not moved an inch, did not respond at all, even when Adam's friendly blow struck his arm. The Potters shared uneasy glances.

"Well," James spoke up, "We'll be in the stands. Good luck, son."

The three waited for a reply. When none came, they turned and moved slowly for the tent's entrance. Lily's head was hung low in dejection. James wrapped a comforting arm around his wife's shoulders and guided her out. Harry watched them go. One of his hands clenched into a fist.

"Harry?" Fleur's concerned voice sounded in his ear.

The boy shook his head slowly. His hand relaxed as he turned towards the quarter-Veela.

"It is nothing."

The field was conspicuously bare. A few outcroppings of rock, but otherwise a plain open arena greeted Fleur Delacour's gaze. Grassland as far as she could see, with the Forbidden Forest looming in the back and the stands full of students to her left. Both were a good kilometer apart from the field's center, leaving plenty of room for the First Task to take place.

The quarter-Veela squinted into the distance. She was rewarded by a faint shimmer. The ward wall. A protective dome of powerful magics that kept both the dragon and the contestant in. Cross over it without the golden egg, and you would be disqualified from completing the First Task. That was the only rule. The champions were free to move and maneuver as much as they liked. As long as they ended up with the golden egg when they passed through the wards.

From Bagman's remarks, both the Durmstrang and Hogwarts champion had implemented simple plans to get by the dragons' guard. Krum had shot his dragon with a Conjunctivitis Curse that had caused the beast to trample half of its eggs in pain. Still, he had managed it, though with a substantial deduction to his total points. Cedric Diggory had fared worse. A lot worse. Judging from Krum's impassive look when the contents of the First Task were revealed, the Durmstrang champion had known that it would be dragons, most likely told by his headmaster. Diggory, it seemed, had no clue. He had been forced to improvise on the spot, and the transfigured dog he had tried to bait the dragon with had worked, if barely.

The collective gasp from the audience had been loud enough for Fleur to hear, even in the isolation of the Champion's Tent.

The quarter-Veela let out a deep breath. It was useless now, to dwell on how the other champions got past their dragon. She had to worry about getting past hers.

In front of her, hundreds of meters away, near where the wards were placed, the Hungarian Horntail brooded over its eggs. Its posture was slumped, hunched, as it covered the nest it was magically enchanted to protect with its body. Fleur caught a metallic gleam beneath the dragon's massive bulk. The golden egg. Tucked in comfortably with a dozen regular ones. Her gaze switched back to the Horntail. The monster's sides shuddered as it shifted its position. Cruel-pointing teeth bared from the beast's reptilian lips. They were visible even from here, specks of ivory on a backdrop of black scales. Its wings covered the ground, splayed out, like some monstrous bat's. The muscular tail, a potent weapon in its own right, festooned with long, thick spikes, swished behind the beast, biding its time to be used.

Fear came. Watching the dragon, studying it as it crouched over its nest, the quarter-Veela felt the unwelcome sensation of dread blooming behind her chest. But unlike before, she did not try to fight it. Did not try to push it away. Instead, she accepted it. Embraced it. The tide faded. The wave of panic subsided into a dull trickle.

Now.

She began to move.

"The Beauxbatons champion has started to walk towards the dragon," she heard Bagman's magnified voice blare out from the stands, "And that has sparked the timer. It will be very interesting to see how Miss Delacour will deal with her Horntail. Mister Krum went directly for his Swedish Short-Snout's weakness with a well-aimed Conjunctivitis Curse while Mister Diggory tried an ingenious method with his Common Welsh that sadly did not work completely. Both champions managed to obtain the golden egg, with Mister Diggory trailing substantially behind Mister Krum's time. Will the Beauxbatons champion fare better? As the only female competitor in this tournament, a lot rides on her shoulders-"

Fleur did not catch the rest. Her attention was riveted on the dragon. Whatever Bagman said, the dull roar from the audience, even her own hitched breath; all became background static that was easily ignored.

The Horntail followed her movements warily. It craned its neck as Fleur moved around its side and hissed when the quarter-Veela began closing the distance. The ridge along its snout flared a warning shade of red.

The first jet of flame came.

A blazing plume of orange fire, it sizzled to a halt a hundred meters from Fleur. Despite the distance between her and the flames, the quarter-Veela still flinched. It had been a warning shot, nothing more, but the heat from the blast was still sufficient enough to cause her skin to prickle.

She continued moving, looping forward in long, elegant strides.

The Horntail let out a yowling roar. It sounded like the squalling howl of a pack of hyenas. Then it spat its fiery breath a second time.

The patch of grass a dozen meters in front of her exploded into a firestorm. Flames the height of a grown man flared into existence as the dragonfire lit the ground.

Fleur weaved past the hissing conflagration, sweat on her brow from the heat, her wand finally out.

The dragon opened its immense jaws again. This time, the fire would hit her, for she had entered the monster's range. Her wand hand moved, waving in intricate patterns. A wall of rock and stone emerged from the ground to her left, ripping up from the earth in a shower of loose soil. It was tall enough for her to duck under, and would last for at least a few moments against the Horntail's breath.

The beast saw her intent. It moved its head a fraction of an inch, so that the next blast from its mouth would connect with the earthen wall.

Fleur smiled. Victory.



The dragon let loose the fire in its lungs. Fleur dove right.

The conjured wall was set ablaze by the intense heat. It took a good three seconds for the Horntail to realize its target was not behind the barricade. In that time, Fleur had already made ten full steps towards the nest.

The jet of flame abruptly stopped. The beast shifted on its hindquarters, the motion heavy and clumsy, as it sought to follow her movements. The dragon's head bobbed as it tracked her, thick, noxious fumes belching from its nostrils.

The quarter-Veela jerked her wand towards her right side. Another wall, this one of loam and packed dirt, erupted from the ground. The Horntail spat its flame. Fleur swerved left.

The wall collapsed under the withering inferno. In the time that it took to do so, she had taken another dozen steps towards the nest.

"INCREDIBLE! Simply Incredible!" dimly she was aware of Bagman continuing to relay the event and the crowd cheering in the stands, "It appears that the third champion has managed to duck consecutive breaths from her dragon! I've never seen such a thing! At this rate she will reach the golden egg with time left to spare! Amazing! How does she do it!"

Fleur allowed herself another smile.

She had spent much time in the Hogwarts library, pouring over thick tomes and arcane manuals after her bodyguard had told her of the First Task. Hours of hard work had finally paid off when she was able to summarize much of what she had learned into a list of indisputable facts.

Dragons were one of the most dangerous creatures, both in the magical and muggle world, to exist on Earth. Diamond hard claws capable of shredding high-grade steel. Enough biting force in their jaws to sever the thickest of tree trunks in a single snap. A killing intent that no other animal could match. These things, Fleur had known before. The books about how dragons lived, how dangerous they were, how many species there were; these the quarter-Veela had set aside. What she wanted to understand were not trivial facts

about the number of teeth in their skulls or the pigment of their skin, but how dragonhandlers could control such ferocious beasts.

The answer was they couldn't. Not in the normal sense anyways. One could not subdue a dragon like one could a dog or cat. It was unheard of. Dragons were proud animals, and fiercely independent. Those that were caught in the dragonhandlers' traps would commonly fight for days before tiring and allowing itself to be dragged into a pen. Even then, it would continue to struggle against its captors, many times mauling them or even breaking the walls to their cage. To induce their submission, the dragonhandlers had no choice but to rely on wards. Many, many wards.

Fleur had been shocked at the sheer amount of magic that the dragon's captors went through to ensure its obedience. Wards that purposely dulled the mind and slowed the senses were used to prevent the dragon from utilizing its relatively high intelligence to escape. Wards that lowered the heat in the dragon's breath were used to keep it from burning a hole in its pen. Enchantments stitched across its skin made the dragon's hide purposefully weak to spells, so that a sustained barrage could bring one down. So many different wards, some common, others Fleur had never heard of before, all interlacing together to form a web of magic that limited the dragon's mind and caged its body.

The dragons that were the challenges for the tournament were treated similarly. Fleur had noticed the way the Horntail's movements were slightly off-balance when she studied it minutes before. Had seen the glazed look that crossed its eyes as it shifted its position to breathe the second blast of fire.

The problem of getting past the dragon now had a frighteningly simple solution.

The quarter-Veela gestured with her wand, and another barricade, the third so far, grew from the earth. The results were remarkably similar. The Horntail immediately heaved a ferocious discharge towards the forming wall. At the same time, Fleur spun on her heel and dove sideways. The roaring flames lapped against the conjured barrier in a raging storm and demolished it. Fleur was already a hundred feet from the nest.

Trickery.

That was how she would get past her dragon.

The Horntail's intelligence was sufficiently dulled so that it could only think in the most basic, rudimentary way. It could follow her motion, trail her as she continued to advance towards its nest, but it could not anticipate where her next movement would be. The wards that locked its mind prevented that from happening. Which meant she could fool it into believing where she wanted to go. Which also meant that she could control where the dragon breathed.

Frustrated, the Horntail let out another yowling roar. She was too near now for the dragon to use its fiery breath. It had to resort to its claws, and even then it was hesitant to do so. A careless swipe from those large talons could mean the destruction of its own eggs.

Fleur ducked under the half-hearted swing and scooped the golden egg into her arms in one swift movement. The quarter-Veela felt a thrill of victory when she dove under a return swing and scrambled away from the nest. The dragon's howls followed her, and Fleur swerved to the side to avoid one last jet of flame.

Almost too easy.

The ward wall shimmered in front of her, and Fleur crossed through it with egg in hand.

The stands exploded into cheers. The Beauxbatons students, easily visible in their blue uniforms, were jumping up and down in excitement. From where Fleur stood, it looked a solid blue line was bouncing in the stands.

"Would you look at that!" Bagman announced elatedly, "Our third champion has completed the first task in the least amount of time! And without damaging the extra eggs as well! Impressive! Very impressive! I think the judges are going to be very gracious with their points for Miss Delacour!"

Fleur smiled. She waved to her supporters, caught her mother and sister waving proudly back in the Judge's Box, and let out a long, satisfied breath. For a second, Fleur Delacour felt like she was on top of the world.

A piercing screech blasted from behind the quarter-Veela's back. The ground groaned and rumbled. Fleur lost her footing briefly, and nearly fell. She was aware of some immense pressure erupting from behind her,

She turned just in time to see the ward wall fail.

Cracks had appeared in the barrier, ugly, visible lesions in the air that grew until the area above the field was entirely covered by them. To the naked eye, they looked like open wounds in the sky, dark, black voids that rippled and contorted in seemingly random directions. Fleur managed to take a single step back. Then the wards shattered.

The magical backlash was immense. Fleur felt her head throbbing in pain, felt her body seize up at being so near the point of collapse. The golden egg fell from her hand. Dimly, she heard the crowd screaming in the stands. Through blurred vision, she was aware of pieces of the barrier falling around her, like shards of broken glass.

The quarter-Veela shook her head numbly, and tried to clear her mind. Her sight came back. She immediately wished it hadn't.

The Hungarian Horntail reared up from the fake nest in front of her, its thick limbs driving into the dirt as it moved from its hunched position. The dragon looked down, the thick muscles in its neck bunching as it directed its gaze towards the eggs scattered below its bulk. Deliberately, contemptuously, it raised a single claw and stomped down. The sound of shells being cracked and pulped made Fleur wince.

The dragon bellowed.

Missing was the yowling, howling tone it had used before. This time, the sound trumpeted from the beast's throat and crashed against the quarter-Veela's ears like thunder.

Fleur swallowed hard. Not only had the ward wall failed. So too had the wards that bound the dragon.

The Horntail swiveled its head towards her. It bared its teeth, revealing rows of curved fangs. Its once vacant pupils were burning with anger.

The quarter-Veela tried to move, but found that her legs were frozen in fear. The thought of facing a dragon that had shrugged off its wards was terrifying. Dragonhandlers more skilled than her had died before to such beasts in the wild. What could she possibly do? Her mind was going blank, her thought process spiraling out of control as the fear that she had thought vanquished came back a hundredfold.

A sudden, hissing sound erupted from her shoulder, accompanied by a sensation that Fleur could not describe. She felt like something was tugging at her body, physically hauling her back even though she was rooted in fear.

The audience roared.

A hand grasped her shoulder, steadying her. Its touch was comforting, strong, and the quarter-Veela instinctively drew closer to it.

"Great Scott!" she heard Bagman yell, "Did that boy just apparate on Hogwarts grounds!"

Harry Potter strode from behind her. His fingers gave her shoulder one last comforting squeeze and then dropped to the side. Beside him came a figure that Fleur had all but forgotten in the events that followed her kidnapping. A great helm with curved horns. Emerald fire glaring from its sneering, hateful faceplate. A curved cuirass of hardened steel that gleamed despite its dark coloring. Gauntlets that were more akin to plated claws. The battered, torn cloak, rippling in the air even though there was no wind, moving with a demented, frenzied life of its own.

Fleur had seen it before when she struggled in the fake auror's grasp. Had thought in her panic that it was perhaps a conjuration, or a transfigured golem sent to stop her captors. Now, as the knight tread past her, moved to the tune of snarling joints, the quarter-Veela became aware of just how real it was.

Harry smiled at her.

"Run, Fleur," he said and turned to face the dragon.

The stands erupted into chaos when the wards failed.

The audience could feel the tremor beneath their seats as the magical backlash spread from the center of collapse. They could see distortions in the air, directly above the field, where the protective barriers had shattered. They could smell the ozone of wasted magic, broken down to its most basic, elementary components.

The wave of dissipated energy smote the stands with enough force to knock every person back in their seats.

Cries of pain rent the air as heads cracked painfully against wood. A few students clutched at the sides of their heads, eardrums temporarily burst by the swell of crushing pressure.

A tumult rose, panicked voices forming a cacophony of chatter, demanding to know just what had happened and what was going on.

A series of loud bangs shot from the judge's box. The commotion lowered in volume as heads swiveled to see Albus Dumbledore standing from his seat, wand out and pointed skywards. A burst of magic erupted from old headmaster's wand, golden colored and flowing like water. It formed a dome, growing in size, magnifying in volume, until it covered the entirety of the stands with its soothing glow. A perfect Protego Maxima, casted under duress. Those beneath the powerful shielding charm felt a strange sense of serenity come over them, as though a comforting hand was being laid over their shoulders. The clamor died down completely, though the anxiousness that drifted under the surface did not. Frightened eyes darted from the scene of the collapsed wards to Dumbledore and then back.

"Great Scott! Did that boy just apparate on Hogwarts grounds!"

Bagman's surprised yelp caused the crowd's attention to shift to the field once more.

There, they saw a boy striding past a girl, wand spinning in his hand, towards the looming bulk of the Horntail. Alongside him stalked something out of man's worst nightmares.

A giant clad in midnight black. A demon caged in dark steel. A knight that was not a knight.

In the judge's box, all eyes were riveted on the menacing figure that kept pace with the fourth champion.

James Potter gave voice to everyone's thoughts in a horrified whisper.

"What in Merlin's Name is that?"

No. Not apparition. What Bagman speaks of is impossible here. You cannot apparate on Hogwarts grounds.

"Run, Fleur."

I step past the girl. My wand spins in my hand, blurring in circles almost too fast to see. Hate walks with me, side by side. His sword drags along the ground, carving a long, winding furrow in the dirt. I can sense the smile under his helm. I wear the same smile on my face.

"A challenge at last," he rasps.

Before us, barely twenty paces away, the Hungarian Horntail cocks its head in predatory curiosity. The spikes that adorn its skull and neck jut at odd angles, frill-like and menacing, making it appear larger than its true size. Jagged, serrated teeth loom from jaws the length of a grown man's body, dripping thick, viscid drool to the ground. Black smoke erupts from its scaled nostrils like steam, twin pillars of choking fog drifting into the air.

My attention, however, is not focused on these trifle details. My gaze is glued to the dragon's eyes, two orbs of shocking yellow with narrow slits for pupils. There is a feral cunning to them, an inhuman, alien intelligence that is primeval yet strangely disconcerting.

This is no stupid brute awaiting its turn in a cattle pen to be slaughtered, I realize. It is aware of its surroundings, to a level perhaps even greater than us humans. It understands such simple things as emotion and feeling, to a degree that at least matches our own. It is intelligent, with a mind that while lacking the logic and

structure of a human conscience, is still filled with a shrewd, bestial wit that more than makes up it.

It is superior to me, and it knows it.

I have never feared in my life. But here, now, staring into the Horntail's eyes, I will admit that I am unnerved.

"The dragon's wards are gone," I say to the knight, "Whatever that has made it slow and addled has been purged from its body. This will be considerably more than a challenge."

Hate nods at this simple truth.

"The most dangerous thing here, my lord, is the fire the beast breathes. If you are caught in its killing embrace, then you will waste away in a heartbeat to nothing more than charred bones and wandering ashes."

The Horntail lets out a low, rumbling growl when it sees that we have not moved. One of its taloned claws paws at the ground in anticipation, ripping deep gouges into the earth. I try hard not to imagine what they can do to a human body.

"Ideas then?"

The knight's grip on his sword shifts. The way he clasps the handle makes no mistake just how eager he is for this fight.

"Your Animagus forms can be useful here, my lord."

The notion has merit. But I dismiss it anyways.

"One is too weak and too small. The other I have no control over."

"You do not need control for you to best the dragon," Hate rebukes, "Brute strength is the key to victory. That, and size. Both of which your second form possess in ample amounts."

As though if sensing the knight's words, the Horntail takes a single step towards us, the motion heavy with menace. From the corner of my eye, I see the dragonhandlers finally running from their stations near the stands, wands out.



"As soon as the dragon sees me changing, it will breathe its fire upon us. That must not be allowed to happen. She needs the time to get away."

Hate chuckles. When he next speaks, there is a faint mocking ring to his tone.

"And since when have you been concerned by the fate of a single girl?"

It takes a few seconds for me to formulate a reply. When I do, I am not sure it is the right one.

"Since I've liked her."

Hate laughs again.

"The truth is always amusing when it comes from you, my lord."

His words cause me to smile in return.

"Focus. The dragon."

"Force shut the beast's jaws," the knight replies, "Keep it from spitting its corrosive breath, and the battle is already half won."

"That won't be easy," I murmur as I watch the Horntail claw another menacing step towards us.

"Yes. The only way to stop a dragon from breathing fire is to either kill it or tame it. Both are daunting tasks. The majority of spells you wand-wizards use will bounce from the beast's enchanted hide or be absorbed entirely. It will be a difficult challenge that is to be sure."

My mind deciphers this information. A myriad of ways to defeat the dragon present themselves to me, but only one guarantees the safety of the girl. Inwardly, I grimace. The choice has already been made for me.

"I have a way."

"A way?" Hate repeats, caution warring with eagerness in his voice, "Enlighten me, my lord, and tell me the method of your way."

"I will seal the dragon's mouth shut."

I sense the knight openly grinning at my audacity beneath his helm.

"There are no spells for that."

"No, there aren't. I will just have to make do."

"And what then," Hate asks, "is my role in this grand scheme of yours?"

"Divert its attention," is my response, "Shield me for the first breath. Protect her."

The knight lifts one of his gauntlets and taps his chestplate lightly with a plated finger.

"You do realize that the Shadows are a poor choice of armor against dragonbreath," he says quietly, "The fire will not hurt me, but the steel I wear will not last long against flames this potent. Fire has always driven darkness away, and here, it is no different."

I am not surprised by this confession. Shadow-forged steel is nearly impervious to conventional weaponry. Blades will break against its rigid surface. Bullets will patter off it like rain. Even magic, spells and curses designed to kill, will pass through it without harm done to its wearer. But there are limits. There always are.

"If I have not shut the dragon's jaws by then, it will be a moot point."

Hate's iron visage inclines slightly.

"Agreed."

Darkness coalesce, wrapping around his arm. I can hear them hissing as they solidify, warping from mist and vapor into the black steel that covers his frame. There is a faint cracking sound, like bones being fractured and reknitted, as the new, rapidly shifting mass adheres itself to the knight's limb.

Hate clenches his fingers into a fist and raises his arm. There, the freshly formed kite-shield gleams, its surface a mirror-like sheen.

"Let us slay ourselves a dragon, my lord."

The confidence in his tone is something I have grown used to hearing. Strangely enough, I do not feel it myself. Perhaps it is because the unwarded Horntail is the most challenging opponent I have yet to face. Perhaps it is because I am concerned about the girl. My mind hopes for the former, and not the latter. My heart, however, knows the truth.

That truth makes me speak.

"If I should fall..." I let the sentence hang there, out in the open.

The knight turns to regard me. Gone are the amusement and the faint mocking tone. I cannot see past the sneering helm that is his face, but I know that behind it, his expression is locked into one of grim resolve.

"If you should fall, then I will protect the girl."

The Horntail opens its maw at long last, clearly tired of this diversion. Past the rows of glistening teeth I can see the flash of pooling fire. I nod, grateful.

"Thank you, Hate."

The wand that has been spinning in my hand abruptly halts, the handle slapping firmly in my palm. I point it in the dragon's direction.

"Legilimens."

Fleur did not run. She couldn't, not while he risked his life for her.

The boy and his knight stood in front of her, the knight in front, the boy slightly behind. Their defiant figures did not quite manage to hide the Horntail's looming bulk. The quarter-Veela reached out with a trembling hand to pull the boy back and away.

It was at this moment that the dragon opened its monstrous maw.

The fire that spat from its mouth was not the lukewarm orange she had prevailed against. This fire was white-hot, blasting from the Horntail's unhinged jaws in a plume of hissing flame.

The knight stepped forward into the oncoming fire and raised its shield.

The wave of suffocating heat that followed smashed into the quarter-Veela and sent her staggering back three full steps. Fleur cried out. The heat was so intense that it felt like a physical blow. She had to turn her head away to avoid it scorching her face. When she turned back, what she saw was something that she would remember for the rest of her life.

The Horntail's flame, a blazing, searing beam that could have melted steel in seconds, was being held back. The knight, his shield glowing a dull red, the edges of his cloak smoking, stood with his two feet planted into the ground, steady as an oak tree. The boy, standing behind the knight, face a mask of grim determination, wand still pointed towards the dragon.

Fleur had been several steps behind them when the blast of fire hit. She had been knocked back by the sweltering heat, her senses overloaded by its sheer intensity. Her bodyguard was in front, where the fire was at its most potent. Fleur could see the sweat pouring down his brow, could see the beads of perspiration that clung at his face and ran down his cheeks. Despite that, he did not falter, did not take a step back like she did. The boy weathered the heat that would have sent men older than him stumbling back in terror.

For a second, the quarter-Veela felt that he couldn't possibly be human.

The flames stopped suddenly and Fleur dared to hope that perhaps somehow the dragonhandlers that were still running for them had stopped the beast's rampage.

"Harry!" she called out.

Her hopes were dashed when she heard the Horntail taking a deep, massive breath.

The second blast of fire was somehow even more powerful than the first. It launched from the dragon's jaws in a meter wide beam, scorching the grass beneath to cinders and leaving the ground a barren, blackened mass.

The knight rose to deny, shield shifting slightly in its grip. The pillar of flame smashed against the slab of metal in a wave of concussive force, buffeting it with fire so thick that it obstructed both the boy and the knight from view.

The quarter-Veela screamed when Harry disappeared from her sight.

She tried to take a step towards him, but the heat was just too much. The sweltering miasma that emanated from the inferno was choking her, threatening to make her eyes water and her skin blister.

He reappeared a second later, still standing, still unmoving as a statue. Parts of his robe were on fire. The boy flung his free arm outwards and away, and the flames that clung to the fabric vanished, dissipating into curls of foul-smelling smoke.

"Hurry my lord!" Fleur heard the knight call out, "I cannot hold out for much longer!"

It was then that she noticed just how battered the warrior seemed. Its armor was dented and singed from the consecutive blasts, the plate pitted and marred by the unforgiving heat. What was most telling, however, was the knight's shield.

It was melting away at the edges.

A once sturdy thing of black steel, it now looked like a fused mess of scrap metal, with the rim already slagging. Droplets of molten metal ran like rivulets down the shield's surface, dripping down and emitting faint, sizzling noises as they landed.

The boy grunted a response, the noise coming out forced and strained. His wand hand moved, dipping ever so slightly downwards. The quarter-Veela noted in alarm that his fingers were trembling.

The Horntail let loose a loud roar of frustration. Fleur tore her gaze hesitantly away from Harry to stare at the dragon.

It had stopped spewing fire. The reason was all too apparent. The beast's maw was slowly beginning to close. Inch by inch, centimeter by centimeter, the Horntail's massive jaws were shutting, the rows of serrated teeth growing nearer and nearer to each other. Fleur could see the monster trying to fight back, straining against the invisible force that was locking its mouth. It shook its immense head like a dog, clawed at the earth to no avail, let out another deep bellow, and when that didn't work, glared hatefully in her bodyguard's direction.

The quarter-Veela wrenched her attention back to her bodyguard.

The boy's wand remained fixated on the Horntail, its dagger-like tip pointed directly towards the space between the beast's eyes. Fleur swallowed. Somehow, somehow, he was sealing the dragon's jaws shut.

The Horntail, however, was far from deterred. Denied its main weapon, the beast smashed at the ground with its thick tail in frustration. As those drooling jaws shut completely, it reared up on its hind legs, and extended its leathery pinions to their full wingspan. The results were utterly frightening.

Down on the ground, on all fours, the dragon had appeared menacing, but Fleur had held on to a small hope for victory, despite its size and bulk. Now, as it stood on its hind legs, the quarter-Veela firmly grasped just how massive this beast was. It towered above them, the height of a two-story building, the width and girth of one of Hogwarts's castle towers. Its wings were outstretched, enormous slabs of reptilian hide, their length so immense that they cast a looming shadow on the ground. The Horntail could not roar or call out, but the rumbling, snarling sounds emitting from its throat was more than enough for Fleur to gage its intent.

The dragon dropped on all fours again.

And then it charged.

The earth shook. Fleur felt the floor beneath her rumble in response as the beast's thick limbs pounded into the dirt. For one terrible second, as the Horntail lunged its whole body towards them in a barreling run, the quarter-Veela felt for sure that they were going to die.

Just like it did with the dragon's breath, the knight moved to intercept. It took a single step forward, and drew back its sword arm.

The Horntail lashed out with its front claw, never stopping, never halting in its motion, clearly intending to bash aside the warrior to get at the boy.

The knight tilted its shield and swung its sword.

Two things happened simultaneously. The curved talons of the beast skid across the shield's surface, emitting a thin, screeching sound. In return, the knight's blade swept in a perfect horizontal arc and carved a bloody furrow in the monster's side.

The dragon twisted its body in agony. It pivoted on its center of mass, swifter than Fleur thought possible, and brought its other claw downwards in a vicious slash. The knight allowed the blow to slide down its shield, and then smashed its weapon against the Horntail's snout with a sickening crunch.

The monster's head jerked back. Broken teeth sprinkled from its jaws, cascading down from its skull like rain. The quarter-Veela could see the ugly gash along the ridge of its nose, the fresh wound weeping dark, crimson blood.

The Horntail pivoted again, and swiveled its entire body three hundred sixty degrees. Its thick, muscular tail swung like a battering ram, a blur of motion as it was whipped around by brutal force. This time, the knight was not quite fast enough to deflect the blow. There was a loud crunching noise as two of the killing spikes on the dragon's tail punched through the warrior's shield.

The knight staggered.

Its sword rose to swing again, but the beast was surprisingly agile and lurched its tail sideways. There was a bone-jarring crack as the shield was ripped from the warrior's limb. The knight's blade cleaved open air and thudded into the dirt harmlessly. The Horntail's claws swung before the warrior could defend, and batted it away in a spray of loose metal shards.

The quarter-Veela watched in horror as the warrior disappeared behind the dragon's massive bulk.

Without the knight to distract, the boy became vulnerable.

The dragon's eyes narrowed hatefully as it turned to her bodyguard. And then it recoiled, flinching back as a volley of bright red beams impacted against its body.

Fleur's heart soared as she saw dozens of figures swathed in dragonhide vests approach at a run, their wands hissing and spitting as they sent salvos of Stunning Spells crashing against the Horntail. Dragonhandlers. They had finally arrived, and their fierce assault was forcing the monster back. Grim-faced men and women, they surrounded the beast on all sides, blasting in coordinated barrages that left smoking welts in the dragon's skin.

The quarter-Veela took this time to try and drag the boy back to safety. Her fingers were close to brushing Harry's robes when the dragon broke free.

Snarling because it could not roar, the Horntail shrugged off the volleys of spells that assailed it from its sides and back, and swung its tail again in a full circle. The dragonhandlers had to dive to the ground to avoid the trunk-like appendage. One was not quick enough and grunted as he was lifted off the ground by the fierce blow. The man soared a good twenty feet through the air and landed in a jumble of loose limbs. He didn't get up again. Fleur fought hard not to scream.

Another, a haughty-looking woman, cried out as one of the beast's spikes gouged a nasty laceration on her thigh. She immediately sank down into the grass. One of her comrades, a tall man with shocking red hair, had to drag her back to safety.

"It isn't working!" Fleur heard the man yelling, "Why aren't our spells working!"

"The vards!" the woman cried back, her voice thick with a heavy accent, "Someone's tampered with the vards! They've thickened the dragon's skin! We can't bring it down with our spells anymore!"

The Horntail growled as more volleys smashed against its hide. Like a maddened bull, it rushed through the circle of dragonhandlers, striking out with its claws at any who dared to bar its way. Two more



wizards were backhanded away, their bodies flying through the air before tumbling to a halt.

The dragon's target, it seemed, was still her bodyguard as its charge brought it closer and closer to Harry. Fleur saw the red-haired man fling his wand hand out in their direction, and more of his fellow dragonhandlers doing the same. A myriad of Protegos shimmered into existence in front of the boy. The quarter-Veela added hers into the mix without hesitation, the golden hue of her Shield Charm joining ones of silver and bronze.

The Horntail smashed through them all. Its immense bulk was like a hurtling freight train, and the gleaming barriers were no match for the colossal momentum behind its weight. The shields simply shattered as the monster ploughed through them. Fleur reeled back as her own broke apart into pieces, her mind momentarily disjointed by the magical backlash.

When she finally managed to retain her senses, the dragon was already rearing in front of Harry, claws rising to strike.

Fleur's legs were already moving before her brain could react. She was going to knock the boy aside to safety, to push him down, away from those sabre-like talons, and if the worse came to worst, take the blow that was meant for him.

She did not get there quite in time. As the Horntail brought its talons up, a shadowy mist spread in front of the boy. The mass of darkness contorted, stretched out in impossible angles, and conjoined to form a vaguely, humanoid shape. Fingers of vapor clenched and became fists of black steel. The center of the distorted haze solidified and became the unbending material of a rigid breastplate. Dull green lights in the dark roared into life, becoming raging, emerald fire behind a sneering, horned helm.

The knight materialized from the shadows, and with it came steely, howling laughter.

It still bore the scars inflicted by the dragon. Fleur could see thick, black fluid welling from three jagged gashes down its chest, flowing in a way that suggested, but couldn't possibly be blood. It was also missing its sword. As though to emphasize that fact, the knight smashed its gauntleted fists together.

"I am not so easily killed, beast," it spat from the slits in its helm.

The Horntail craned back its head. It stared down at the warrior, its slit-like pupils flashing. With a rumbling growl, it struck with all its might.

The taloned paw descended.

The knight's arms rose.

There was a ringing clash as the limbs of both combatants met, then a startled hiss from the dragon as the knight caught its claws with its hands and locked it above in a vice-like grip.

The dragon's mind is so very different from our own. That is my first thought. As I continue to keep those immense jaws shut, I marvel at how the brain of this beast works.

There is no logic to it. No reason or sense of judgment. Its conscience is ruled by urges and needs, and its very existence is defined by those two simple things. It cannot tell right or wrong, good from evil, but it can feel the difference between what it needs to survive and what it merely wants. And what it wants is many. Its consciousness is a jumble of loose thoughts and vague memories, all related to its primal urges, collected together to form a single, bestial gestalt. A simple mind, but one that is inherently disorganized. Trying to traverse it is like trying to sail the ocean on a lifeboat in the middle of a frenzied storm.

A consciousness that is so much more inferior to ours, yet also simpler, purer, deadlier.

I can feel the monstrous hatred it holds for its handlers lapping in its mind like waves, a loathing so unadulterated that it is almost beautiful. I can sense its vengeful rage at being penned into a cage for most of its adult life, blasting from its conscience in one concentrated aura. I can taste its animalistic fury at the way it has been treated, emanating from its mind like some dark miasma.

Compared to this dragon's, my own hate seems petty and inconsequential.

The Horntail turns its baleful gaze towards me. Locked in Hate's iron hold, snout fused shut to its mandible, the dragon appears defeated. It can no longer breathe fire without the risk of scorching the inside of its own mouth. It can no longer strike with its claws, for it cannot prevail over the unholy strength of the knight. The only avenue of attack that is left for it is to strike back against the intrusion into its mind.

I brace myself. Legilimency is a double-edged sword. It paves the way for mental attacks by the caster, but it also allows the one the spell is being cast upon to strike back.

I believe I am sufficiently prepared to fend off the dragon's mind. I am no natural Occulumens, but the barriers within my mind have never been breached. Those that tried in the past I have sent screaming to the floor, their flayed brains leaking from their ears. I am not the best, but at the very least, I am not weak.

Nothing in this world could have prepared me for what is to come.

There is no warning. When the Horntail first strikes, I am not sure what I am being hit with. All I know is that it hurts.

Every inch of my body suddenly feels like they're on fire. The nerve endings under my skin crackle and burst like balloons. The muscles on my face contort into a mask of unbearable agony. My hands twitch uncontrollably, the trembling so bad that the one with the wand in its grip nearly drops it. My mouth tries to make sound, tries to scream, but all that can come out is a steady, prolonged Gnhk-Gnhk-Gnhk noise. I can feel blood weeping from my eyes and ears, welling from ruptured nerves and painting my cheeks with streaks of crimson.

The pain is so powerful that I almost break the connection.

I reel at this sudden assault. My head snaps back. My surroundings blur. I am dimly aware of someone calling out my name in alarm.

The second blow smashes into me before the pain from the first can fully abate. I feel parts of my conscience slipping dangerously close to insanity just to escape the agony.

I try to fight back. The recesses of my mind not screaming from the pain manage to form the slashing edge of a blade. I send it careening into the depths of the dragon's consciousness. The blow would have carved a human's psyche in two, splitting his mind into two separate intelligences and forever ruining his cognizance. The dragon shoves the blow aside as though it was nothing and blasts back with its third strike.

The Occulumency shields that have protected my mind for years begin to crack.

Merlin. That was only the third blow.

It is only now that I begin to understand what the dragon is hurling at me.

A battle with Legilimancy is like a duel with rapiers. Elegant yet also deadly. The goal is to stab your own mind deep into the opponent's, inflicting as much damage as possible before withdrawing. A master Legilimens can gouge deep, painful wounds in his enemy's psyche, tearing apart memories and recollections with sickening ease. A battle between two such masters can take hours to complete, each wizard fencing with their minds before finding that one weak point in his foe's shields. Then the rapier goes in, diving past the enemy's guard, punching through the area of weakness and causing massive, unsustainable injuries to the brain.

I have seen wizards skilled in Legilimancy reduce their foes to drooling, gibbering vegetables in the time it takes a normal man to blink. I have done the same before; except I always make sure that my opponent dies shortly after. A life without a consciousness is only slightly better than the Dementor's Kiss.

What the Horntail throws at me isn't a rapier. It's not even a blade. It's a sledgehammer, formed by the dragon's primal hate and animalistic rage. Normally, such crude blows fueled by basic emotions are easily blocked. An accomplished Legilimens will have Occulumency shields that only pinpoint mind-strikes can penetrate. But what the beast hurls at me are not the weakening emotions of a dying wizard, but something much stronger.

The dragon's primitive intelligence is governed by urges and needs, structured in a way that is easily invaded by human minds. But when

it finds a certain urge or decides on a need, it will never rest until it is fulfilled. And what its urges and needs are telling it now, is that for it to be free, I must die. It hates me not because I have inflicted some grievous wound to it, but merely because I exist. It rages not because I have done something wrong, but merely because I stand in its way.

The dragon is throwing its entire existence at me, all of its pent up frustration, all of its stored rage and accumulated hatred, smashing it like a cudgel against my mental barriers. Crude, but effective. Oh so very effective.

The fourth blow rocks me to the very core. I lose command of my left arm for the briefest of seconds, the limb spasming before I manage to regain control.

I try another attack. My mind forges a second blade, the magic merging together to form a gleaming white sword that I prepare to use against the Horntail. Then the fifth and sixth blows come, one after the other, almost simultaneously, and the weapon my conscience has labored to build disappears in a loose collection of pained thoughts.

I growl at the loss. Legitimacy requires concentration. With the beast constantly smashing its mental gestalt against my own, I cannot form the weapons I need to attack. The implications are clear. If I cannot attack, then I must defend. And if I am reduced only to defending, then I might as well have already lost.

The seventh blow smashes against my mental shields with enough force to make my teeth chatter in my mouth. I have to bite my tongue to keep from crying out.

This continues for I don't know how long, with the dragon hurling itself against my mind, eroding my defenses with consecutive, nonstop attacks. I try to tally the number of blows I've received, but lose count after twenty. My perception fades as the battle wears on, with my surroundings blurring to hazy outlines and malformed shapes. The only thing I can focus on is trying to hold against the Horntail's onslaught, and I barely manage that. Every time the beast batters against the gates of my conscience, I just barely manage to cling on to what is left of my defenses. Every time it smashes its bestial psyche against my own, I barely manage to stay coherent.

Each blow is like the blunt end of a hammer, crashing against my mind and threatening to shatter the fragile hold I have over my sanity.

It seems like an eternity has passed. In reality, I know it couldn't have been more than a few moments. But the pain makes it appear so. It is a constant, unending presence, hounding my conscience with relentless agony. In these short minutes, I feel like I have weathered enough suffering for a dozen lifetimes.

Parts of my mind have already shut down. Fleeting images of my surroundings enter my brain, but I can no longer discern their contents. Lucidity comes and goes. I do not have the strength or the concentration to fight back. All I can do is hold onto the connection; maintain it so that the dragon's jaws remain clamped shut.

Something disrupts the haze. It drifts slowly into my conscience, coiling around my tormented thoughts like a lifeline. I grab onto it with strength born from desperation. In response, it drags me from this muddled state, and lifts me away from the mire of torment.

Clarity comes slowly, and when it does, I realize just what has saved me.

An odor. A heavy, rancid stench that wafts into my nostrils and seeps into my mouth. It is only through experience that I recognize it for what it is. The stink of burning flesh.

My gaze drifts downwards, to where my wand hand has remained unmoving all this time.

What I see makes me want to laugh.

Thin pillars of steam drift from the gaps between my fingers, hissing as they trail upwards. Beneath, portions of my skin have already turned an ugly shade of red, the surface raw and throbbing.

I am confused, if only for a moment. The Horntail has not managed another breath since I forced shut its jaws. It is not its fire that does this.

The reason becomes apparent after a second of strained thought.

The sheer amount of magic that I am expending to seal the Horntail's jaws shut is immense. Had it been any other wizard in my place, then their magic would have been drained away in seconds. Added to that is the dragon's own primal energy. Legilimency binds the caster and the victim together until the caster chooses to end it. So what flows through my wand is not only my magic, but the dragon's as well. Wood would have lasted scant heartbeats against such raw, unmitigated power. Steel, a sturdier medium, manages to endure, but all that energy, all that force has to go somewhere.

The answer is basic thermodynamics. The transfer of energy is not one hundred percent infallible. Portions of that energy will be lost in the transfer, dissipated elsewhere and never recovered again. Or in other words, heat.

I can feel the skin on my palm blistering, roasting, in some places even melting as the wand is pumped with continuous, nonstop magic. I can see the spaces in between my fingers, where the wand's once charcoal black surface has turned red hot. I can hear the magic screaming, no longer singing, but screaming as it leaves my hand.

Strangely enough, there is no pain. Despite the fact that the stink of burning flesh is entering my nostrils, despite the fact that faint trails of steam are emerging from the gaps between my fingers, I can't feel pain. For a second, I think it is because I am dead. Dead men don't feel. Then I realize it is because the pain in my mind is so immense that it dwarfs all other agonies, the immolation of my hand included.

My teeth bare into a leering grin.

I have two choices now before me. What is happening to my hand has made me realize that. I can release the connection between the dragon's mind and my own, or I can maintain it until something else severs it. The former grants me a quick death, consumed by the dragon's fire. The latter offers a long, torturous end as my magic drains from my body and my sanity crumbles around my conscience.

Neither choice is satisfactory.

A wheezing chuckle escapes me.

What a delightfully cruel joke this is.

In the end, just like before, the choice has already been made for me. I will hold the connection for as long as I can. Despite the pain that claws at me, I will resist the dragon's mind until the very end. There is a small hope that I can wear the beast down. A glimmer, but it is still there. So I will hold out to the last, and defy the Horntail until either it falls or I do.

Humans would call this courage.

I just don't want to die.

The stands had fallen silent.

Safe in the protective dome of magic, the students of the three schools sat in nail-biting tension, some gripping the edges of their seats, others clinging to their friends. Every eye was glued to the magical screen, where a fierce battle raged in the middle of the field.

The knight, a terrifying figure of black armor and emerald flames, stood with its legs firmly entrenched in the ground, its plated limbs holding the dragon's claws back. The Hungarian Horntail, a massive, looming monster of spiked spines and killing intent, struggling to break free, its sealed jaws drooling, the nostrils in its snout belching thick black smoke, its scaled, leathery wings beating a futile beat against the ground as it strained in vain to pull its limb from the knight's grip. The dragonhandlers, over two dozen in all, blasting at the thrashing beast with spells, ducking the great sweeps of the dragon's spined tail as it tried to swat them away, coordinating volleys of curses that left sizzling marks in the Horntail's hide but nothing else. And the boy. His features locked into a pained grimace, body stiff and rigid, wand pointing in the dragon's direction, preventing it from opening its snarling maw.

It was a scene that spoke of desperation and resolve, of courage and grim fatalism, and they could watch it all in excruciating detail.

The magical screen recorded the battle at an unimaginable pace, chronicling the smallest elements of the fight and transmitting them to be viewed in front of the stands. Details that the human eye would miss at first glance; the shifting colors on the Horntail's crest, the number of knobbed scales that lined the area around its eyes, the



faint, red scar that marred a dragonhandler's cheek, the number of joints in the knight's gauntlet. All were transmitted to the magical screen and magnified in smaller, clearer displays to the sides and bottom.

The crowd had been forced to watch in stunned shock as the dragon broke free from its containment wards. They had been forced to watch in terrified trepidation as the beast shrugged off the magical enchantments that dulled its mind. All of them had screamed when the first blast of fire tore from its gaping jaws, had gasped when the knight and the boy emerged unscathed from the firestorm, and then cheered when the boy finally forced shut the Horntail's mouth.

Now, there was nothing to cheer about. It had dawned upon those in the stands that this fight was one in which the hero could not win.

For the hero was wounded.

Streams of ichor poured from his eyes, streaked down his cheeks and stained the uniform he wore a dark, muddy brown. Despite this, he still smiled, smirked as the crimson fluid dribbled down from his chin to the grass below. The blood made his smile seem like a macabre grin.

So far, everyone watching had been frozen in their seats in fear. Now, as the boy bled, one man managed to stand raggedly up.

"Harry!" James yelled hoarsely from the judge's box. His frenzied steps took him past the Delacours who were white as ghosts, past Amos and Selene Diggory who were gaping at screen, past the Bulgarian delegation, who were all staring at the scene before them in wide-eyed wonder, past the Hogwarts professors who were watching from their seats in stunned disbelief. He reached the edge of the box, prepared to vault over the ledge, realized that the Protego Maxima was still in place, and spun around.

"The shield, Dumbledore!" the man panted, "Lower the shield!"

The aged headmaster did not reply at first. His face was utterly serene, but the intense aura of power that emanated from his frame was staggering. The twinkle in his eyes had long disappeared, replaced by a grimness that seemed alien when matched to his

kindly features. It took another panicked "Albus!" from James for him to respond.

"I will not, James."

The auror captain's expression was one of incredulous disbelief.

"Damn it, Dumbledore! Harry's being hurt! I have to help him!"

The old wizard's gaze flickered from the screen to the auror.

"I will not, James," he repeated, "The shield must not fall."

James crossed the distance between them in three quick strides. There was a panicked anger glowering from his countenance, a vengeful wrath that promised merciless retribution to those who sought to deter him. He leaned in close so that his next few words were hissed into the headmaster's face.

"That's my son out there, Albus," he whispered fiercely.

Dumbledore met the man's frantic stare calmly. He gestured to the stands.

"And those are the sons and daughters of the rest of magical Britain."

James's response was to draw his wand. Lily gasped. The rest of the occupants in the box paled.

"Let down the shield, Dumbledore," the man growled. His eyes resembled those of a caged animal's, wild and desperate, "I won't ask you again."

"James!" McGonagall cried out in admonishment.

The auror ignored her and leveled his wand towards Dumbledore.

"Lower the shield, Albus."

The old wizard's face remained impassive, but his eyes closed.

"Think for a moment, James, of what you are doing," Dumbledore spoke quietly, "There are children in the stands. As soon as you fell me with a spell, the shield protecting them will collapse. And as soon as the dragon overpowers Harry, it will seek to rampage across the field, where the stands are. There will be many deaths on your hands if the dragon reaches the children without the shield's protection."

"My son won't fall if you give me a chance to help him," the man's voice cracked painfully.

"Be reasonable, James. There is an entire squad of dragonhandlers out there, on the field, trying to subdue the Horntail. If they can't help Harry, how can you?"

The auror glared at Dumbledore, went back to staring at the screen, and then returned his gaze to the aged headmaster.

"Give me a chance, Albus," James's voice had lost its angry edge, but the desperation was still there, "Let me help him. Just this once. Please."

The old wizard stared at the pleading man sadly.

"I wish I could, James. But I cannot. There is a chance that as soon as I end the conjuration, the dragon will defeat Harry and charge towards the stands. I will not be able to cast a second shield in time to stop it. Many innocents will die. That must not be allowed to happen."

"It's a risk, but damn it, it's worth it! Don't deny me this chance, Albus! I've got to help him!"

"There is nothing you can do, James," Dumbledore said firmly, "If you go out there, at best you will delay the inevitable. At worst you will throw your life away and the lives of all those protected by the Protego Maxima."

The auror's wand lowered. His shoulders slumped, defeated. His free hand clenched and unclenched erratically.

"I've lost him once before, headmaster," James murmured, "To my own stupidity. I can't lose him again. I just can't."

"I am sorry, my friend," Dumbledore said softly, "I truly wish that there was some other way, but there isn't. It all falls to Harry now. Believe in him, and I think you will be surprised at the results."

James laughed harshly. It sounded self-derogatory to all those in vicinity.

"You believe he can beat the dragon by himself?" the auror shook his head, "I know my son. He is strong and proud. But Merlin help him, that's an unwarded dragon he's facing. He can't defeat it alone."

The old wizard was about to reply when a wave of gasps erupted from the stands. In the judge's box, Lily let out a scream. Both men spun to stare at the screen.

There, displayed in perfect clarity for all to see, were their worst fears confirmed.

Harry had fallen to his knees.

The pain is too much. Even for me. My body bears a lifetime of scars, is used to the pain as I am used to hate, but this... this is an agony that consumes my mind, tearing at my sanity, and trying to shatter my conscience beyond repair.

The Horntail continues to thrash in Hate's grip, ripping at the ground with its free claw, leaving deep gouges in the earth. Its yellow eyes glare at me, slits of pure, undiluted fury that are a mirror to the howling tempest that batters against my mental shields. For that is what is. A hurricane of primal aggression that threatens to overwhelm me with raw emotion. And it is succeeding.

I cannot endure this agony any longer. It shames me to admit this, but the truth is plain to see and even plainer to feel. My limbs shudder and twitch. My chest heaves painfully. My vision blurs and swims.

I cannot overcome this beast. This is what my body tells me. That in this battle of wills, I am the weaker one.

Something must give.

One of my knees thud into the ground. I grit my teeth at this indignity. My own anger flares at being forced into the soil, but the emotion is like a cool fire compared to the roaring inferno that is the dragon's fury.

Through the pain, the anger, the hate, I marvel at the strength of the beast. It has brought me to my knees with its rage alone.

"My lord," Hate snarls at me. His gauntlets hold the beast's claw from descending, armored fingers wrapped around the curved, scything talons. The knight's tone is filled with recrimination. He has not expected me to falter so soon. I do not blame him. Neither had I.

"My lord," Hate rasps again. This time it sounds like he is pleading with me. He wants me to stand up. To fight back. To win. I cannot, and that stark truth shames me further.

Never before have I been subdued to such a state. Never before have I bent knee to a foe. Never before have I felt so frail. So mortal. So human.

For a moment, the disgust I feel towards myself is more powerful than the pain.

The respite does not last long. The agony comes back, this time accompanied by the sensation of fluid dripping down my cheeks. Thick and viscous, it flows from my eyes, from my nose, and my ears, sticking to my face like tar. I know it is blood because I can taste its coppery tang leaking into my mouth. I grin. What a sight I must be, to those who can see me.

Through my blurred vision, I see figures moving, stumbling around the Horntail. Dragonhandlers. Their spells collide against the beast's hide in barrages of color and light, but against an unwarded, berserking dragon, they might as well have been throwing pebbles at a cement wall.

I cannot help them. Not with spells. My hand has long been fused to the wand it holds, the flesh of my palm melted into the steel itself by the unrelenting heat. I can't tell where my fingers begin or end.

This is a cruel joke.

For me to be ended this way. For me to fall here. I have never deluded myself into thinking I am blessed to live a long life. My end is on the battlefield, bathed in blood and surrounded by the bodies of my enemies. My fate, my glory is there. The death will be quick, painless, and I will die knowing that I defied the foe until the very end. But here, now, this glory is denied to me. Against the dragon, my death will be lengthy and prolonged. It will suck the magic from my core until there is nothing left. I will be forced to watch my magic leave me, feel it draining away while I am helpless to do anything. For if I break the connection, the dragon will incinerate me as soon as it opens its jaws. So I kneel. In the dirt. Blood caking my face and hate welling impotently in my heart.

There will be no victory here. All this defiance, all this courage will amount for nothing if the foe I struggle against cannot be bested. For a brief moment I recall the tale I told of the knight and the dragon. One that lives in a fairytale. The other surviving in reality. At this time I cannot help but think I would rather be the knight in the fairytale.

This is a cruel joke, but it is still funny to me. The futility of it all. The senselessness of this struggle. All of it.

The humor is too much for me to bear.

I burst out laughing. Hollow, desperate. I sound like a crazed madman.

The Horntail senses me weakening. Millions of years of evolution have honed its predatory instincts to inhuman levels. It can feel me tiring. It can smell the desperation that emits from my body. It can even taste its own imminent victory and my looming defeat. And so, it rushes in for the kill.

The pain increases tenfold as the dragon's conscience smashes with renewed frenzy into what is left of my meager defenses. The barriers in my mind, Occlumency shields that Hate himself has never breached, shudders with multiple impacts. I feel as though my skull is splitting in two. My concentration wavers. My sight fades and then comes back. When it does, I see that the dragon's jaws have opened a fraction of an inch.

"My lord!" Hate roars. My vision turns raggedly to him. Ironclad, his entire frame bedecked by black steel, he makes for a stoic sight. His plated limbs remain strong, despite the taloned paw he strains against. His armored legs do not bend, despite the immense force that crushes him from above. His iron visage stares back at the dragon, defiant to the last. I smile. Even now, he refuses to admit the defeat that I have already conceded.

How disgraceful this is, for the lord to kneel and the vassal to stand.

"My lord," the knight says again. His tone has turned uncharacteristically soft. There is a pained, weary edge to it now. It no longer sounds like he is trying to urge me on. It sounds like he is trying to comfort me.

My lips twist to say a final goodbye to him, to thank him for his service. The words do not get a chance to leave my mouth. Something soft, something warm, something that should have no rights on being here presses against my back. Pale arms encompass me, hugging me from behind. Strands of silvery blonde hair fly into my vision, tickling my face and clinging to my cheeks. There is a wetness on my neck, and I realize suddenly she had been crying.

I do not need to turn to know who is behind me. What vexes me is that she is still here.

I try to tell her to run, to flee, but my voice is ruined by the pain. What comes out is a gurgling, choking sound, like a man trying to speak through a mouth full of gruel.

My message is ignored. Her hold on me grows tighter. From the corner of my eyes I can see her lips moving, forming words. I think she is trying to encourage me. I am not sure because the pain has robbed me of my hearing seconds ago.

My free hand reaches for her, trembling, to push her away, to shove her from the danger. I manage to latch onto her uniform, but that is all I can do. There is no strength left in me anymore. My arm sags, the fingers clutched tight to her robes but powerless to do anything besides holding on.

Her mouth continues to move. I can make out her saying don't... don't... don't... over and over again.

The part of my mind not dulled by pain tries to make sense of her words.

Don't what? Don't fall? Don't waver? Don't die?

The last thought makes me laugh again. The dragon's flame will consume all. As soon as it overpowers the last of my mental barriers, the Horntail will open its maw and spew its deadly fire. There will be a brief second of unimaginable agony, and then nothing. The inferno will reduce us to ash and scatter our remains for the winds to claim.

I can almost imagine it. The firestorm will sweep into us without mercy. Flesh and skin will crinkle like paper before the intense heat. My body will wilt in this conflagration, devoured whole by the dragon's fiery breath. I will burn. And she will burn beside me.

There is a moment of reflexive pain. Like a stab from a lunging blade. The image of her screaming amongst the flames, robes turning to ash, her beauty being charred black, pierces the veil of torment in my mind. There are no words to describe the feeling that wells within my breast.

I am a bounty hunter. A mercenary. Very few of us live long enough to enjoy the spoils we have won. Death is an old friend to us, and we wouldn't blink an eye should He choose to come for us.

She is not. She has never killed in cold blood, never fought for survival on the battlefield. She is pure, innocent. And that purity, that innocence deserves to be preserved. She should not die here. In this misbegotten place, kneeling in the dirt with her arms around a monster. She needs to survive this, to live a long, contented life with the one she loves by her side.

She thinks I am that one. I still disagree.

I force my fingers to release the hem of her robes. She looks up in surprise, her perfect face framed by tear tracks.

There is no one to save her. The dragonhandlers continue to pelt the beast with volleys of spells, but the Horntail's thick hide is



impervious to these pinpricks. There is no miracle to shield her. This is no fairytale where the hero is delivered into salvation at the last moment by the hands of a god. There is only me.

The logic here is simple.

For her to survive, I must defeat the dragon. But the fierce rage that throws itself against my conscience cannot be denied. The Horntail's mind is a bestial, wrathful force that has reduced me to a state of pain that would have slain a normal man ten times over. The agony has not stopped. It has never stopped, even as she embraced me. The nerves in my body beg for the pain to end. My conscience, wracked by torture, pleads for the same thing. For me to give in. To surrender the fight. To just let go.

The image assails me again, the memory of her writhing in the flames alongside me.

No.

Not here.

I will not fall here. I will not be ended here. Not in this place. Not while I still draw breath. Not while she is still alive.

My lips twist into a feral snarl of hatred. I force strength back into my legs, willing them to move. With excruciating slowness, the muscles obey my command. My free hand smashes into the ground, fingers splayed out. The digits dig into the dirt, finding purchase in the ground. I use them as an anchor, leveraging my body back up.

I manage to stand.

It takes all my willpower not to fall down again.

The Horntail's eyes widen in disbelief. The beast has not expected its prey to be defiant once more. It hurls itself against my Occulumentary shields with renewed vigor. The fresh assault makes me reel, forces me to take a single step back. But I do not fall. Though my legs threaten to buckle under me, I still stand.

I stare back into the dragon's baleful glare. I cannot speak, for the pain will just make my words sound slurred and incoherent. But I

can think, and the mental connection between us makes sure the Horntail knows my thoughts. So far, it has only sensed my desperation, my submission to the impending doom it has in store for me. Now, I make it know the strength of my will.

The snarl on my face becomes a savage grin. The beast recoils.

I will not bow.

My legs tremble from the effort of standing, shudder at the pain that lances through them.

I will not bend.

Every motion, every movement from my body feels like white hot fire.

I will not break.

My wand hand, blackened, smoking, centers on the dragon.

I sever the connection.

There is a moment of absolute stillness, a moment of utter silence, where the world around me seems to stop spinning. The dragonhandlers stop moving, frightened expressions locked onto their faces in rigid masks. Their spells hang in midair, bright beams of color that halts in motion as though stopped by an invisible wall. Even Hate, his armored form straining against the Horntail's strength, becomes motionless. His tattered cloak, made from the shadows itself, is frozen in place, its frayed edges still and deadened.

In this moment, there is only the dragon and me.

The Horntail shakes its massive head to clear the fog in its mind. It tears itself from the knight's grip. The once captured claw smashes into the ground and carves great gouges in the earth. Its jaws open at last, and behind the rows of razor-sharp teeth, I can see the pooling ball of white heat that will engulf us in killing fire.

I smile.

This moment is mine.

"Legilimens," I say through blood-flecked lips.

The world begins moving again.

The dragon's jaws remain open, but the flames that coil in its throat do not come. Its mind is unprepared for this sudden continuation of our mental war, and its defense falters.

My conscience is too weak to form the powerful blows we have traded back and forth. My strength has long expired, wasted trying to hold the monster back. There is only enough magic left in me to form the thin point of a spear.

I feel the dragon's mind rearing up at last, its rage merging to form the weapon it needs to crush me. For that split second, as it gathers its magic, as it forges the hammer blow to smash me into submission, it is vulnerable. And in that second, I hurl the mind-lance into its conscience with all my strength.

The magic spears past its guard, punches through its defenses, shears away its resistance like a white hot knife. I can sense it panicking, rushing to protect itself with its rage and hate. But it is too late. I am already in its mind, sinking deeper and deeper into its consciousness. I can see its memories as I burn through them. I can feel its emotions as I shred them. I can sense the primal intelligence retreating, scrabbling back as I force myself closer towards the center of its being.

No mercy. No pity. No respite.

I unravel the Horntail's mind thought by thought, crush its resolve with my own iron will, and unmake the foundation of its own existence.

The monster roars in agony.

Its defenses sheared away, its mind laid painfully bare; the dragon thrashes against the ground and tears great chunks of earth free in spurts of loose soil. Patches of shredded loam land around me. I ignore them and continue burning my way deeper into the dragon's mind.

At last, the beast's magical core is revealed to me. A bright, burning orb of latent energies, revolving slowly in place. I can sense the Horntail's magic emanating from it in suffocating waves, the power so raw, so pure that the magic in my blood sings in response.

The mind-lance flies straight and true.

A spear of incandescent light, it smashes into the sphere of energy and plunges deep into the dragon's magical core.

There was a long, terrible roar. It lasted for bare seconds, but to those who heard it; the piercing, wailing howl seemed to blast for an eternity in their ears.

The Horntail collapsed.

As soon as it did, a swell of arcane energies erupted from its body and exploded outwards in a single, coherent wave. The dragonhandlers were lifted from their feet and hurled raggedly away. The knight was smashed into the ground so that it too was forced to kneel in the dirt. The girl that the boy had strived so long and hard to protect was knocked onto her back in a heap. A cloud of dust soon covered the entire scene.

In the Judge's Box, Dumbledore frowned and braced himself.

The wave of magic lapped over the Protego Maxima like water on rock. The stands shook, shuddered as the torrent of magic passed over the powerful shield and dissipated away. Many students screamed when their seats trembled beneath them.

The dust settled. Just in time for the crowd to see the boy finally falling. His body, limp and lifeless, collided with the ground with a dull thud.

The crowd's dismayed groans turned into screams when the Horntail dragged itself back up.

It clawed itself forward, heaving its massive bulk in a slow, anguished crawl until it loomed above the prone boy. Long, serrated teeth gleamed in the sun's light as the dragon opened its jaws. The girl scrabbled over to her fallen protector, fumbling for her wand, trying to shield the unmoving body with her own. The Horntail

ignored her, ignored the knight that was standing back up, ignored the dragonhandlers who were watching from where they lay in horrid fascination. Its tongue darted out, long and serpentine, and licked the boy's face.

The knight began laughing. Even from so far away, those in the stands could hear its mocking laughter and the dark humor it contained.

In the Judge's Box, James stuttered out three stunned words.

"What just happened?"

The corners of Dumbledore's lips twitched into a small smile. The aged wizard flicked his wand, and the shimmering barrier that had been the Protego Maxima began the laborious process of dissolving away.

"I do believe," a familiar twinkle had appeared in the old headmaster's eyes, "that Harry has tamed a dragon."

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